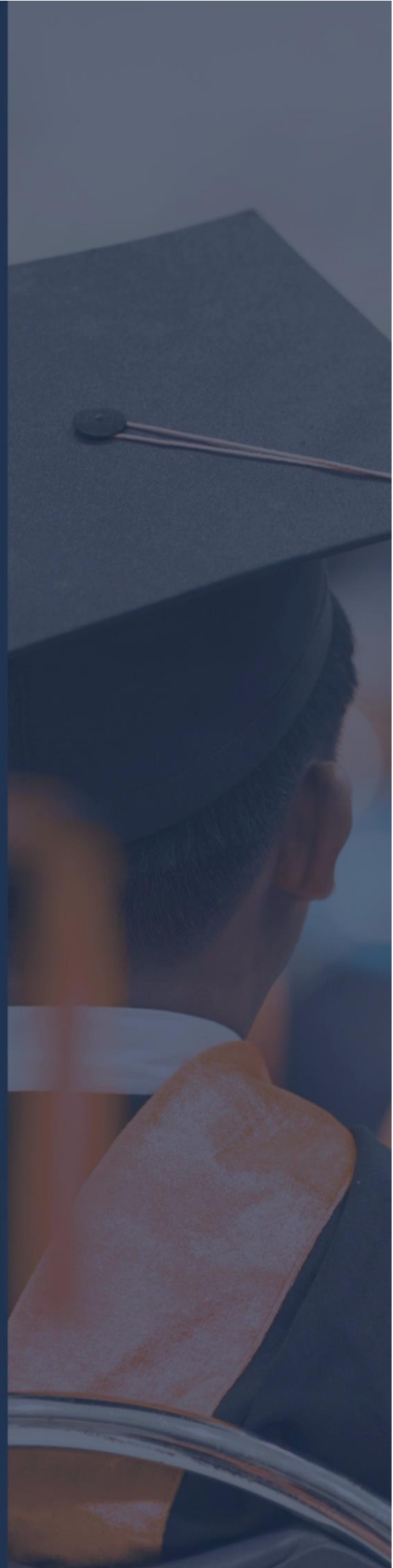# Care to College

An Exploratory Study on Care-Experienced Students' Educational Journeys

Merike Darmody

CARE TO COLLEGE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON CARE-EXPERIENCED STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL JOURNEYS

Merike Darmody

May 2025

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Empowering People in Care (EPIC) is a rights-based organisation advocating with and for children in care, young care leavers, and anyone with experience of the care system up to the age of 26. EPIC operates the only National Advocacy Service for care-experienced youth, which works to ensure that their voices are represented and considered in decisions that affect their lives.

Research and policy at EPIC are informed by the data generated by the Advocacy Service caseload and participative research projects – both of which provide an evidence base to support national decision-making on alternative care. EPIC also delivers a programme of youth engagement and participation that provides spaces for connection, fun and growth, as well as opportunities for action and learning by working on youth-led campaigns and projects.

Further information is available at www.epiconline.ie.

ABOUT TU DUBLIN AND THE PATH 3 PROGRAMME

The Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH 3) is a partnership between TU Dublin and community organisations to support access to higher education for under-represented groups.

The partnership brings together different sectors, including statutory education providers and community organisations to share knowledge and devise strategies that support equity of access to higher education. It particularly focuses on strategies to support people from communities and groups where there has not been a strong tradition of participation in higher education.

PATH 3 is funded by the Higher Education Authority under the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education. The project forms part of TU Dublin's commitment to extending community partnerships, engagement activities and creating pathways for all.

THE AUTHORS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOREWORD

This research was made possible by a grant from TU Dublin Access and Outreach under PATH 3 funding, which supports access to higher education for under-represented groups as part of the Programme for Access to Higher Education under the National Access Plan.

The ESRI and Dr Merike Darmody have produced an important study. In her exploration of the subject, we can see clearly the value of placing young people's experiences at the centre of research about them. The voices of the young people give us a rich and nuanced insight into both the academic and social challenges of navigating school, the transition to post-school education and beyond. It shows us that to address challenges in relation to post-school education, we need to understand how attitudes to education start in the early years and are influenced by care placement changes and school changes, learning difficulties, support needs around schoolwork, and mental health issues.

EPIC's commissioning of this study is a response to the direction of our Youth Council, to highlight barriers faced by care-experienced young people in the education system. A key recommendation emerging from our work is the need for greater awareness and understanding of the school lives and educational journeys of children in care and young adults with experience of the care system.

This is an important piece of research for deepening our understanding in this regard. Any impact that it will have will be due in no small part to the commitment of the author and the ESRI to excellence in the production of independent, high-quality research.

This research is relevant to schools, education stakeholders, foster carers, social workers, children's rights organisations and policymakers to enhance our understanding of school life and education through the lens of children in care.

EPIC sees this research as an important part of our broader programme of work in this area with the aim of creating educational environments where care-experienced children and young people can thrive.

We hope our ongoing work with others will create a synergy between the different sectors and stakeholders and ultimately lead to practical supports for children and young people as they move through care and education.

Wayne Stanley,

CEO, EPIC, Empowering People in Care

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ABBREVIATIONS

BPD	Borderline Personality Disorder
CAO	Central Applications Office
CES	Care-Experienced Students
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
DARE	Disability Access Route to Education
EET	Education, Employment or Training
EPIC	Empowering People in Care
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEAR	Higher Education Access Route to Education
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCVP	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SCP	School Completion Programme
SUSI	The Student Grant Scheme

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Some children and young people do not reside with their birth families but are, instead, being cared for by the state. Systematic reviews have indicated that while not a homogenous group regarding their personal circumstances, many care-experienced children and young people tend to face some similar challenges when growing up and moving through the education system (O'Higgins et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2017; Haddow et al., 2021; Townsend et al., 2020). On average, care-experienced young people tend to have lower levels of educational attainment in comparison to their peers who have not been in care (Cotton et al., 2014), although their attainment levels can increase later on (Harrison, 2017). The implications of their school and care experiences are likely to extend beyond second-level schooling since the educational outcomes of children and young people in care are strongly linked to their post-school outcomes across a number of fields, such as employment, entry into third-level education and training (Harrison, 2020; Herbers et al., 2013; McNamara et al., 2017). This makes exploring their experiences in the education system an important focus for research and policymaking.

The aim of this small-scale exploratory study is to gain a better understanding of the factors that may influence post-school decision-making of care-experienced young people regarding entry into third-level education. With this in mind, the study starts with exploring retrospective views of a small group of care-experienced young people about their school experiences, as such experiences are likely to influence young people's school engagement, aspirations and decision-making about their post-school pathways. The study also investigates their transition from school and the care system into post-school education and independent living, focusing on the challenges they encountered. It considers the experiences of students in third-level education, but also of those young people who had interrupted third-level education experience, i.e. who had dropped out. Drawing on the insights of a small group of care-experienced young people and a group of key stakeholders representing various organisations, this study seeks to inform policy development in supporting post-school transition of care-experienced students and identifies areas for future research. Reflections on young people's own perspectives highlight various challenges they face in the care system and at school, particularly valuable for policymaking in this area. Furthermore, the study will provide insights for school practice and support services for care-experienced young people.

Although small in scale, the study contributes to the international and national literature by highlighting the factors that shape the decision-making processes of care-experienced young people regarding their post-school pathways and their experiences in third-level education. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does care experience impact on young people's experiences in school?

2. How does care experience impact on young people's interaction with friends, teachers and other school staff?

3. What are the main factors that shape the decision-making process of care-experienced young people regarding their post-school pathways?

4. What are the main challenges care-experienced young people face after leaving school and entering third-level education?

To answer these questions, the study draws on data from focus groups with care-experienced young people who have progressed to third-level education, and those whose participation in third-level education has been interrupted. The findings also incorporate insights from a group of key stakeholders who attended a consultation event.

SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF CARE-EXPERIENCED CHILDREN AND THEIR POST-SCHOOL TRANSITION TO THIRD-LEVEL EDUCATION – RESULTS OF THE STUDY

International and Irish studies have shown that many care-experienced young people encounter multiple challenges when moving through the education system (O'Higgins et al., 2015; Bakketeig et al., 2020; Darmody et al., 2013; Brady and Gilligan, 2019). While some succeed, despite the adversity they have encountered in their lives and fare well in terms of their educational outcomes and accessing third-level education, others tend to be more affected by structural (e.g. education and care system) and personal factors (e.g. care experience, mental health issues, learning difficulties) and do less well at school and beyond (Haddow et al., 2021, Hammond et al., 2020).

In line with previous studies from Ireland and elsewhere, the findings of this study indicate that young people with multiple care and school placements tend to be more likely to find their experiences at school more challenging compared to their peers who are in more stable and nurturing placements and have had fewer school changes. Young people's accounts have shown that high mobility in terms of care placements and school changes translates into interrupted learning and social ties, echoing findings of previous research from Ireland and abroad (Darmody et al., 2013; Schwartz-Mette et al., 2020). Furthermore, the findings of this study showed that frequent school changes can have a negative impact on young people's school attendance and school engagement. In line with international research (Hammond et al., 2020), those young people in the study who experienced mental health issues and learning difficulties tended to have additional challenges in academic and social spheres.

In line with broader research on children who have experienced adversities (Frederick et al., 2023), this study highlights the importance of having a positive

and supportive relationship with at least one key adult, whether at school or in the care system. Teachers, foster families and social workers can play a key role in facilitating school engagement of care-experienced young people, support their learning and personal development, and help build up their aspirations. However, less supportive relationships at school and low expectations regarding educational progression of care-experienced young people and perceiving them as 'troublemakers' can have an adverse impact on these students. Early intervention that starts when the child enters the education system and support are key, as young people develop their attitudes, aspirations and dispositions towards education early on in their educational career (Greenaway and Treton, 2017; Gale et al., 2010). This study also showed that foster parents and social workers can be an important support in supporting education of care-experienced young people and enhancing their aspirations.

Previous research from Ireland and elsewhere have highlighted the challenges associated with leaving secondary school and choosing a post-school pathway (McCoy et al., 2014; The Smith Family, 2022). This juncture may be particularly challenging for care-experienced young people as they lack supporting family structure (Storø, 2018). Many young people in this study struggled with the 'double transition' – leaving school and foster/residential care. Preparing for state exams while preparing to move into post-school education and independent living caused considerable stress for some young people, sometimes adversely affecting their wellbeing. Some young people were critical about the guidance they received at school regarding their post-school course options or had their third-level education options criticised by the guidance counsellor. Yet others did not want to enter third-level education straight after secondary school or wanted to do this later. Having their aftercare support tied to attending full-time accredited education or training course was criticised by several young people in this study. Overall, the results of the study show that care-experienced young people wish to exercise control over their post-school pathways; however, the current structure of support available is rather rigid and embedded in the assessment of need and direct link between support and post-school education/training. While for many young people, continuing their education at third level was seen as a natural step, others felt that they would have liked to choose this pathway on their own terms, rather than being directed to take this step in order to access aftercare allowance and supports.

Various studies have highlighted difficulties young people experience when moving into third-level education, largely centring around finances, accommodation, course regret and preparedness for study in post-school education (Hauschildt et al., 2024; Fenech, 2025; McCoy et al., 2014). The situation is likely to be more challenging for care-experienced young people who often lack the supportive family structure, as highlighted by international literature (Storø, 2018; Paulsen and Berg, 2016). While all care-experienced students in this study had accessed third-level education, many experienced various challenges. These ranged from practical arrangements involving moving to a new location on their own, difficulties

around finances and accommodation, getting used to different teaching and learning approaches to not being certain about their interest in the course they had enrolled in. While some navigated these challenges with the help of their aftercare workers, others had limited support from their aftercare worker and felt that they had to 'figure things out the hard way', to quote one young person. In total, 16 care-experienced young people participated in this study. Although 12 young people in this study were attending their course or had completed it, four young people had dropped out, highlighting factors such as not wanting to enter into third level straight after secondary school, having mental health challenges and learning difficulties as some of the challenges that contributed to their dropping out of college.

DIRECTIONS FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study demonstrates that the educational experiences of young people in care are often influenced by structural and personal factors. Of particular importance in this respect are care placement quality and consistency and school stability, in line with existing research (Atkinson and Hyde, 2019; Ellis and Johnston, 2022). Furthermore, support from a dedicated person emerged as an important factor in helping care-experienced young people to negotiate their care and school placements, helping to develop their aspirations and planning for their next steps after finishing school.

At school level, teachers in conjunction with social workers need to prioritise the needs of care-experienced young people to support their school engagement and ensure they have the best possible opportunity to continue their education after finishing school. Teachers and other staff members need to be sufficiently informed about the challenges faced by many care-experienced children and young people, something that could be addressed by initial teacher education and continuous professional development. Furthermore a whole school approach enables schools to create a supportive environment where these young people can thrive. The School Completion Programme (SCP) is one way to provide additional support for these students. However, SCP is only available in DEIS schools and thus not accessible to students attending non-DEIS schools. Closer collaboration is also needed between schools and social workers in supporting care-experienced children and young people. As social workers are sometimes the only constant in the lives of care-experienced children and young people when they are still at school, more attention should be directed to retention of the individuals and funding of the sector, to prevent a turnover of social workers. Future research could explore how different stakeholders (schools, social workers and other agencies) interact in providing a wrap-around support to young people as they move through the care and education system. Furthermore, early intervention is important. Targeted supports (including consistent key contact, access to mental health/trauma support) need to be available to young people early on and be provided consistently throughout their primary and secondary schooling.

The results of the study show that entry into third-level education is associated with a number of challenges for care-experienced young people. This suggests that care-experienced young people who have accessed third-level education may need additional support. The accounts of young people have revealed that more guidance is required at school level, as this group of young people are particularly dependent on this type of support. Care-experienced young people may also benefit from other types of tailored support prior to leaving school and entering third-level education, something that could be explored in future research.

Financial support for young people, including care leavers, accessing third-level education has not kept pace with the cost of living in Ireland. There have been recent calls for such support to be increased for all students, to reflect the actual living needs. A Standardised National Aftercare Allowance was introduced by Tusla in 2015.[1] This allowance can be up to €300 per week. As this allowance has not been increased thereafter, it represents a cut in support to the care-experienced young people in real terms. Further research is needed to establish the financial needs of care-experienced young people attending full-time education and training. Considering the current housing crisis in Ireland, public debate has focused on lack of accommodation for students. In some cases, on-campus housing is only available during term time. This is likely to pose particular challenges to care-experienced young people who would need accommodation for the full calendar year and for the duration for their studies. With this in mind, care-experienced students should be prioritised in the allocation of on-campus accommodation. Where year-long accommodation is not possible, third-level education providers could consider linking the student with a local family who could host them during the holidays, an approach utilised by some of the higher education institutions in the United Kingdom.

If eligible, Irish young people in third-level education or training can avail of an aftercare service by Tusla up until the age of 21. This can be extended to the age of 23 if a young person is still in full-time accredited education or training. Some young people highlighted limited support received when in college, despite having been allocated an aftercare worker. At present, Tusla employs 71 aftercare workers; this suggests that these individuals may experience a notable workload, as they generally monitor the situation of several young people. Future research is needed to explore the workload of aftercare workers and associated challenges.

Limited support at third level could also be explained by the fact that some young people did not want to be identified as 'care-experienced', thus making it potentially more difficult for third-level institutions to put in place targeted supports. In order to provide maximum support for care-experienced students, including a question on care experience in the CAO form could be explored, while

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[1] This payment is available for young people who have been in care for 12 months on their 16th birthday or have been in care for 12 months in a row before their 18th birthday. Eligible young people may also be entitled to grants as a care leaver from Care Leavers Ireland.

clearly outlining incentives associated with doing so. This would also enable linking up care leavers with a named contact at third-level institutions.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1   BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

A wealth of research has highlighted the importance of educational attainment to the future life chances of young people (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000; Jones, 2002). There is now a growing body of international and Irish studies that have focused on educational experiences of children and young people who have lived in alternative care settings – such as foster care or residential care (Bakketeig et al., 2020; Brännström et al., 2020; Baker et al., 2023; Brady and Gilligan, 2019; Brady et al., 2019a, 2019b; Darmody et al., 2013). Research from different jurisdictions shows that the challenging life circumstances of these individuals, often multiple care and school placements, allied with their experiences at school often result in difficulties and disruptions in their educational careers that may have a negative impact on their academic outcomes, thus possibly limiting their post-school pathway options, including access to third-level education (Darmody et al., 2013; Brady and Gilligan, 2019; Bakketeig et al., 2020; Baker et al., 2023; Bayfield, 2023; Child and Marvell, 2023).

It is important to note that care-experienced young people are not a homogenous group, as their personal circumstances such as foster family characteristics, economic circumstances and challenges associated with changing care settings, changing schools, experience of additional needs, peer and social networks vary. However, as demonstrated by systematic reviews (see Gypen et al., 2017 and Townsend et al., 2020) as well as other studies from different jurisdictions (Cotton et al., 2014; Vinnerljung and Sallnas, 2008; Boddy et al., 2019) on average, these young people tend to have poorer educational outcomes compared to their peers who have not been in state care. In Ireland, there is a lacuna of detailed data on educational outcomes of care-experienced children and young people (Ó Súilleabháin et al., 2024). Data that is available shows that care-experienced children are somewhat more likely to leave school without their Leaving Certificate than their peers (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2024a). Care-experienced young people are less likely to progress to third-level education, and in case of pursuing this option, tend to do it later as shown by international and Irish research (Williams et al., 2020; Colvin and Knight, 2021; Brady et al., 2019a). Evidence from the UK shows that encountering various challenges, some care-experienced young people leave third-level education before completing their degree (Office for Students, 2021), and by doing so, may lose support from the state. International research has also shown that for some young people, their care experience intersects with other forms of disadvantage, such as minority ethnic or migrant background, belonging to lower socio-economic groups, and belonging to an LGBTQ+ group (Cheruvallil and Anand, 2023; NICE, 2021; López López et al., 2024;

Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011; Gypen et al., 2017) that can have an impact on their experiences in the education system.

Much of the discussion internationally focuses on the outcomes of care-experienced young people (Gypen et al., 2017; Parsons et al., 2023), with less focus on structural and systemic factors, thus placing the onus on young people themselves (Liebenberg et al., 2015). However, such factors, including support from the care and education system, play a key role in the experiences of these young people as they move through the care and education systems.

Internationally, various terms are being used for children and young people who do not live with their birth families. For the purposes of this report, the term 'care-experienced' will be used to describe an individual who has experienced any form of formal care, at any point in their life, and for any duration. According to the data from Tusla, there were 5,801 children (0–17 years) in care at the end of February 2025 (Tusla, 2025). Drawing on the lived experiences of a small group of care-experienced young people, this study explores how they fared in the education system and what factors impacted on their post-school pathway to third-level education.

1.2   CARE-EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION

Not all children and young people have equal opportunities when growing up. Much of existing research over several decades has focused on the disparity in educational opportunities and outcomes between different groups of students. This disparity is often reinforced by structural factors, including the education system. In Ireland, some groups of students are more likely to face challenges in the education system, including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, students with special educational needs (SEN), migrant-origin young people (Devine and Cockburn, 2018; Smyth and Hannan, 2000; Cosgrove et al., 2018; O'Higgins et al., 2015). International and Irish evidence has shown that challenges are also faced by care-experienced young people (Townsend et al., 2020; Gypen et al., 2017; Darmody et al., 2013). Lower levels of educational attainment have been shown to notably influence the future life chances of young people in terms of access to further and higher education, as well as high prestige jobs (Parsons et al., 2023; Parsons et al., 2024).

1.2.1   Academic sphere and care experience

Some care-experienced children and young people grow up in a relatively stable environment, staying with one family throughout their time in care and do not experience many school changes; others undergo several care placements and school changes that may contribute to their educational disadvantage (Clemens et al., 2018; Parsons et al., 2023; Bakketeig et al., 2020; Ellis and Johnston, 2022;

McSherry et al., 2013). Several international studies[2] have shown that in general, care-experienced children tend to have poorer educational outcomes compared to non-care experienced young people (Berger et al., 2015; O'Higgins et al., 2015; Cameron et al., 2012, 2018; McSherry et al., 2013) and experience lower educational expectations from their teachers (Mannay et al., 2017a; Harvey et al., 2015). Poorer outcomes can also be associated with a range of other factors, such as quality of support received when in care, placement breakdowns, neighbourhood and community characteristics, and experiences of trauma before entering the care system (Walsh et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2021). Frequent school changes may also have an adverse effect on mental health, wellbeing and behavioural issues (Townsend et al., 2020). Having a special educational need and/or disability can further impact on the educational outcomes of care-experienced children and young people (De La Fosse et al., 2023). In some cases, age matters – when children enter into care at a younger age, they tend to have better outcomes (Walsh et al., 2018).

On the other hand, research from Ireland and abroad indicates that care-experienced children and young people can perform well at school, especially when receiving sufficient and consistent wrap-around supports, including support with their learning, as well as having more stable placements and good-quality care (Gilligan, 2007; McSherry et al., 2013; Brady and Gilligan, 2019; Moran et al., 2016; Darmody et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2018; Mannay et al., 2017b). Recent research evidence from a small group of care-experienced young people also shows that despite their challenges in the education and care system, many have similar aspirations as their peers in terms of entry into higher education (Ó Súilleabháin et al., 2024). The authors also highlight the importance of further education in university entry (ibid.).

1.2.2 Social sphere and care experience

Several international studies have highlighted the challenges experienced by young people in the social sphere. Teachers' attitudes, expectations, perceptions and classroom interactions play an important role in how young people experience school and their school engagement (Johnston et al., 2021). In the same vein, care-experienced young people who have a positive and supportive relationship with their teachers and other staff members are more likely to be more engaged with school, see school as a safe environment and fare well in both social and academic spheres (Townsend et al., 2020). However, sometimes teachers may lack sufficient understanding of what it means to be in formal care, at times having stereotypical views of these young people and having low expectations for them because of their care background (ibid.). The situation may be more difficult for care-experienced children and young people in cases when schools have not appointed a designated person to support them, as tends to be the case in Ireland. Acknowledging this,

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[2] Sebba et al. (2015) highlight the need to utilise a comparator group in research on care-experienced children and young people.

some jurisdictions have put in place special support for these young people. For example, in England, the maintained schools[3] have a statutory duty to designate a staff member with a responsibility of supporting and promoting educational achievement of care-experienced children (Department of Education, 2018). This staff member is tasked with collaborating with key stakeholders (e.g. social workers, foster carers) and relevant agencies, is the main point of contact for the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) in schools and a source of information for families who wish to access appropriate services (ibid.).

Friendships and positive peer relationships are important elements in young people's lives as this can promote their mental health and wellbeing (Schwartz-Mette et al., 2020). However, this sphere can often be challenging for care-experienced children and young people, especially for those experiencing multiple school changes that involves moving away from their friends and having to establish new friendships in a new school. These disrupted peer attachments can have a negative impact on care-experienced young people in terms of their confidence and developing an enduring support network. However, a peer group can have either a positive or negative effect on a young person. There is a lacuna of research in Ireland on care-experienced children and their peer relationships. There is some evidence that having good friends is important for care-experienced children, although some find it difficult to establish friendships because of negative stereotyping (Darmody et al., 2013). A review of research by Haddow et al. (2021) on young people in alternative care has shown that a positive and supportive peer group can enhance students' experiences at school while the peer groups that exhibited more negative traits tended to be a strong predictor of problem behaviour. Furthermore, research from the UK and Ireland shows that some young people may experience bullying because of their care background (Dansey et al., 2019; Darmody et al., 2013). Longitudinal data from England has shown that among this group, bullying increases with age, with many being continuously bullied between the ages of 14–16 years (Green et al., 2010). Research from the UK highlights the importance of friendships for care-experienced children and young people, particularly regarding improving their life satisfaction (Roesch-Marsh and Emond, 2020).

Another area of importance is the relationship between care-experienced young people and their care workers and social workers. While Gilligan et al. (2022) in Ireland highlight the importance of continuity and quality of such relationships regarding student outcomes, studies from elsewhere show many young people experience disrupted relationships or do not receive sufficient support from their care workers (Munford, 2022). The lives of many care-experienced children and young people are filled with uncertainty, whether due to care placements or school changes (Mølholt et al., 2022). Thus, not receiving sufficient support from care and social workers can have a detrimental effect on their outcomes. The relationship

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[3] Most schools in the UK are state schools. There are four types of maintained schools: community schools, foundation and trust schools, voluntary aided (VA) schools and voluntary controlled (VC) schools.

between the foster family and a young person in their care is equally important. Research from Ireland indicates that moving into a stable foster care environment had a positive impact on young people's school experiences (Darmody et al., 2013). International research has shown that good, supportive and warm relationships have been found to enhance a young person's self-esteem, and emotional and behavioural development (Sprecher et al., 2021). The authors note that developing a trusting relationship with foster parents can take time as young people need to overcome their experiences of previous relationships in their lives. This considered, multiple care placement changes can be particularly disruptive and disorienting for a young person.

Certain measures have been used in order to provide these young people with additional support from a key adult. For example, as indicated by research from Ireland, mentoring programmes have been found to have a positive impact on care-experienced young people in developing their confidence, supporting their social and emotional wellbeing and educational engagement (Brady et al., 2019a, 2019b). As shown by research from Australia, mentoring can take several forms, including formal mentoring programmes, a naturally developed supportive and trusting relationship with an adult, a supportive relationship with another young person close to the care-experienced person's age, peer mentoring (close age and shared life experiences) and therapeutic mentoring that is based on formal therapeutic intervention (Lohmeyer et al., 2024).

1.2.3   Leaving care

Leaving school is considered a major transition point for all young people (McCoy et al., 2014). International and Irish research has shown that care-experienced children and youth have often experienced multiple placement transitions during their educational career that often coincide with the key transitions in the education system (Bayfield, 2023; Darmody et al., 2013). In Ireland, young people leave care at 18 years of age[4]. Leaving the care system can be seen as an interruption of an existing support network and may result in young people needing to rely mostly on themselves (Atkinson and Hyde, 2019; Ellis and Johnston, 2022). Irish research has highlighted challenges associated with access to an aftercare worker before a young person leaves care (Mullan, 2022). Research from Australia indicates that in many cases these young people do not have sufficient information about the possibilities and opportunities beyond secondary school and may have difficulty accessing existing services and supports (Muir and Hand, 2018). In line with similar studies, research from Norway shows that compared to their non-care peers, these young people often lack the supportive family structure to offer support and guidance (Storø, 2018). Hence access to both formal and informal supports when leaving care is particularly important for this group of young people (Paulsen and Berg, 2016). Having at least one good adult, people that

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[4] Young people leaving care at the age of 18 are entitled to aftercare services (including in-person support, an individual plan and financial assistance) based on their assessed needs.

these young people can turn to, offers an invaluable support for care-experienced young people (Storø, 2018). Aftercare services in Ireland generally include support from a designated support person, whose support and guidance a young care leaver can draw on (Glynn and Mayock, 2018). However, there seem to be delays in assigning an aftercare worker 19–24 months before leaving care, as recommended by national guidelines, and some young people do not have an aftercare worker assigned before they turn 18 years of age (Mullan, 2022). Leaving care can be understood as an 'accelerated' transition for many, considering the faster rate of entry into adulthood and independent living, compared to young people who have not been in care of the state (Palmer et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2021; Dixon et al., 2018), experiencing this transition and associated challenges sooner than their peers (Stein, 2012). The outcomes of these young people are generally associated with the availability and quality of aftercare support (Dixon et al., 2018; Daly, 2012; Mullan, 2022).

1.2.4 Aspirations, expectations and entry into third-level education

Much of international and Irish research has explored post-school aspirations and decision-making of young people (Billet et al., 2024; Belando-Montoro et al., 2024; Cuervo et al., 2019; McCoy et al., 2014; Faas et al., 2019). In general, young people from more advantaged backgrounds tend to have higher post-school aspirations compared to their less advantaged peers (Schoon and Eccles, 2014; Berrington et al., 2016). Reflecting the expansion of higher education in developed countries, more young people now decide to select this option as their future pathway. However, their aspirations are formed and developed throughout one's schooling career, depend on a number of personal (e.g. experience in care, mental health, learning difficulties) and structural (e.g. education and care system) factors (Sellar and Gale, 2011; Khattab, 2014; Gorard et al., 2012; Furlong and Biggart, 1999) and necessitate access to support and advice at different key junctions throughout the compulsory schooling (Osterman, 2000; Nelis et al., 2021; Boguslaw, 2017).

There is also a growing interest in post-school pathways of care-experienced young people. Some international (Henderson et al., 2016) and Irish studies (Ó Súilleabháin et al., 2024) have shown that post-school aspirations and goals, including entry to third-level education, of these young people may not differ notably from their non-care peers. This can be explained, in part, by care-experienced young people having the same career goals as their peers (Mannay et al., 2017a). However, according to this study from Wales, the aspirations tend to be lower for an older cohort of young people, which could be associated with their educational career being disrupted more often (ibid.). It is important to note that the findings regarding aspirations and ambitions of care-experienced young people are mixed. For example, contrary to the findings of Henderson and colleagues in England (2016), another English study has shown that care-experienced young people have lower expectations of moving on to higher education in school year 9 (age 13/14) compared to their same age peers who have not been in care, even when controlling for special educational needs (SEN) status, history of school

exclusions and family benefit levels (Williams et al., 2020). These authors argue that the aspirations and expectations of care-experienced young people are associated with the support offered by the schools, the extent to which their social workers valued education, and support received from their foster parents (ibid.).

Access to effective support systems is a central theme running through the literature on aspirations and ambitions of care-experienced young people (Mannay et al., 2017a). In some cases, not picking the right subjects at the right time reduces the opportunities available to young people later on. Hence the provision of guidance and support should start early in their schooling career and should involve support from care workers and foster families (Creed et al., 2011; Crawford et al., 2011; Munro et al., 2011). The interventions should also consider personal circumstances of young people, including their experiences of trauma, as their experiences can shape aspirations and post-school decision-making (Colvin and Knight, 2021; Bayfield, 2023). In Ireland, there has been a call for emotional counselling and therapeutic supports to be provided in all primary and second-level schools (Downes, 2022). It is important to note that post-school decision-making often coincides with preparation to move out of the care system, and additional stress associated with this (Colvin and Knight, 2021; Mullan, 2022).

Previous research from Ireland has highlighted the importance of guidance counsellors in advising students about options available to them after finishing school (McCoy et al., 2014). Such advice is often invaluable for more disadvantaged groups, including care-experienced young people (Collins et al., 2023) and supports the development and realisation of their career aspirations (Colvin and Knight, 2021). However, guidance received at school, which may often be of variable quality (McCoy et al., 2006), may leave many young people undecided and unsupported. In Ireland, guidance in second-level schools is integrated into both Junior and Senior Cycle. The service is provided by guidance counsellors who are qualified teachers and hold the relevant recognised qualification for school-guidance work. Despite the importance of the role, there is relative lack of research evidence on the impact of guidance counselling on students (Hearne and Galvin, 2014), with disparate levels of this service identified by earlier research (McCoy et al., 2006). More recent research has highlighted challenges encountered by guidance counsellors and students with regard to increased demands for the service and constraints on time for the service, especially for more personalised, one-to-one discussion (McCoy et al., 2014; Healy, 2019).

Existing international research has also shown that care-experienced young people are less likely to enter directly into higher education after finishing school, compared to their peers (see Harvey et al., 2015 for Australia; Bayfield, 2023 for Wales; Ellis and Johnston, 2022 for England). Yet, many do so later in life (Harrison, 2020; Abbott-Chapman, 2011), following a non-linear pathway to higher education (Ellis and Johnston, 2022). In Ireland, an exploratory study by Brady and Gilligan (2019) based on 18 participants has also shown that while some care-experienced young people have disrupted educational careers, others progress to higher or further education. However, for some this progression took place later in life.

Data from Ireland shows that while the proportion of care-experienced young adults enrolled in further and higher education in 2022 was similar to all young people (52% vs. 49%) compared with all children aged 18 to 23, a larger proportion of care-experienced young people attended further education courses (36%) than all young peers (10%). The figures for attending higher education courses were 16% and 39%, respectively. Some in further education may have subsequently progressed to higher education (CSO, 2024a).

Progression to higher education, or third-level education more generally, can be challenging for young people. Existing studies have highlighted the difference between school and higher education. Research from Ireland has indicated that adjusting to the new learning environment can be challenging for all students, although after an initial adjustment period, students get used to different approaches to teaching and learning (Denny, 2020). International research has shown, however, higher education tends to be aimed at a 'typified imagined student' who accesses and moves through higher education in a linear process (Child and Marvell, 2023). This situation is often different for care-experienced youth as their educational trajectories can be more complex, shaped by their previous experiences when still at school, as demonstrated by research from the UK and Ireland (Harrison, 2017; Brady et al., 2019a). Furthermore, complex personal circumstances may also impact on their ability to access and sustain college and university courses (Bayfield, 2023). These challenges may be compounded by moving residence, lack of or limited support networks, social isolation, emotional and mental health issues, workload, financial difficulties, and interpersonal issues (O'Neill et al., 2019; Bayfield, 2023; Child and Marvell, 2023). For some care-experienced students, moving accommodation may also trigger their trauma related to moving between different care placements (O'Neill et al., 2019). Furthermore, some accommodation arrangements can be problematic during the holidays, as care-experienced young people lack an alternative place to spend this time (Child and Marvell, 2023).

In order to sustain and support their education, care-experienced young people need to have access to reliable, consistent relationships with a trusted member of staff or another adult with the necessary knowledge about how to access practical, emotional and financial support (O'Neill et al., 2019; Bayfield, 2023; Ellis and Johnston, 2022). Insufficient support may make some students to consider dropping out of post-school education (Ellis and Johnston, 2022; O'Neill et al., 2019). Research in Ireland has highlighted the challenges associated with identifying students with care experience who have applied to study at third level (Ó Súilleabháin et al., 2024). At present, such students can disclose their care status on their CAO application if they apply to the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme, although not all students may wish to do so.

Considering the various challenges care-experienced young people face when making a transition from school to third-level education (Ó Súilleabháin et al., 2024; Brady et al., 2019a), additional support interventions may be necessary. For example, in Wales, summer schools or taster days are available, and some are

tailored specifically for care-experienced young people (Bayfield, 2023). Other supports that have been recommended include welcome packages, mentoring and named sources of support, as well as emotional or wellbeing support (ibid.). It is also recommended that third-level education institutions work together with care-experienced young people in deciding what supports are most appropriate, considering that these students often have diverse needs (Child and Marvell, 2023).

In order to develop targeted supports for care-experienced young people who have entered third-level education, these institutions need to be aware of the care background of the students. However, some young people may not want to reveal their background, having previously experienced stigma and being 'treated differently' (Ellis and Johnston, 2022; Townsend et al., 2020). The research findings on whether young people want to be identified as being in care vary, however. A study on school-age children and young people in Ireland found that they did not want their peers to know they were in care (Darmody et al., 2013). However, a study in Scotland indicated that most young people declared their care experience when applying to college or university and found this experience to be positive (O'Neill et al., 2019). It could be that care-experienced young people may be more comfortable in declaring their care background at an older age. Furthermore, they may be more willing to do so, if this may result in access to additional support from the third-level institution they are attending.

Some narratives portray young people who progress into college and higher education as 'successful' or 'resilient', thus placing the onus on these young people regarding their outcomes in the education system, rather than considering systemic and other factors that shape their experiences and outcomes (Bayfield, 2023). The 'resilient student' label is often juxtaposed with discourses around low levels of educational attainment and other issues, thus potentially contributing to stigma attached to being in care (Bakketeig et al., 2020). Yet, much of the existing research on educational disadvantage has highlighted the importance of the 'distance travelled' – that is the progress of the young person relative to their starting point when assessing students' outcomes (Thomas et al., 2017). Hence, studies need to focus on what it means to be successful for different groups of students.

1.3   CARE-EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE IN IRELAND

Recent figures for Ireland show that 5,801 children (0–17 years) were in care at the end of February 2025 (Tusla, 2025). An overall majority (88%) tend to be in foster care (including general and relative foster care) (CSO, 2024a). International research has highlighted the negative impact of high mobility of care and school placements on young people. The figures for Ireland show that many care-experienced young people are in a stable care placement, with half of the children (50%) having a single care placement (CSO, 2024a). However, a small percentage of the children (9%) in this group had more than five placements (ibid.). The data

also show that compared to all children, a higher proportion of care-experienced children had experienced more than one primary and secondary school change (CSO, 2024a)[5].

Regular school attendance is often associated with better educational outcomes of children (Klein et al., 2022). Frequent school and care changes may have an adverse effect on school attendance of young people and their educational outcomes. In Ireland, students who miss more than 20 days of school are referred to a branch of the Child and Family Agency, Tusla Education Support Service (TESS). School attendance is generally shaped by a combination of institutional and individual factors (Thornton et al., 2013) and can be problematic for care-experienced children due to their personal circumstances (Mercieca et al., 2021). In terms of school attendance in Ireland, high absenteeism (those absent from school for 20 days or more) in school year 2022/23 was slightly higher for care-experienced children (17%) than for all other children (15%)[6], with the most common reasons for absenteeism being 'unexplained' (52%) and illness (23%) (CSO, 2024a). Being in foster care rather than in other care types was associated with fewer cases of serious absenteeism (ibid.).

International research has shown that in general, care-experienced children tend to have poorer educational outcomes. In Ireland, only a small percentage of care-experienced children (6%) attending primary or second-level schools repeated at least one year of schooling (CSO, 2024a). However, care-experienced children were more likely to leave school without their Leaving Certificate than their peers (28% vs 8%) (ibid.). Being in foster care with only a single placement versus other types of care and more placements seemed to act as a protective factor – those in foster care and with a single placement while in care tended to fare better in terms of completing their Leaving Certificate (ibid.).

The population in Ireland is highly educated, with over half of 25–64-year-olds having a tertiary qualification (CSO, 2024b). Individuals with higher education also have higher rates of employment and better life chances (Edgerton et al., 2012). Recognising the need to assist young people leaving care and support their post-school education, Tusla carries out a needs assessment[7] and provides support in aftercare planning, which addresses a number of areas including education, training and employment, but also more practical elements, such as finances and budgeting, accommodation, health and wellbeing, personal and social

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[5] Data on enrolments into primary school over the years (from 2015/16 to 2022/23) shows that care-experienced children were more likely to be enrolled at more than one primary school, compared to all children (32% vs 14%). The corresponding figures for secondary schools in the period 2012/13 to 2022/23 were 20 per cent and six percent accordingly (CSO, 2024a).

[6] The figures are based on the proportions of children absent 20 days or more amongst all those aged 7–17 years in January 2024 (CSO, 2024a).

[7] The process of leaving care is supported by needs assessment when a young person is 16/17 years of age. A written form is filled in in collaboration with the young person, aftercare worker, and any other adults who provide support to the young person. This needs assessment forms a subsequent aftercare plan (from six months before a young person turns 18 up to 21 years old), the aim of which is to teach young person independent living skills. A young person is linked up with an aftercare worker for ongoing support (for further information see www.tusla.ie/services/alternative-care/after-care/tell-me-more-about-how-aftercare-works).

development. The process is supported by aftercare workers[8] from Tusla, as once a young person turns 18 years of age they are no longer supported by a social worker. In order to access aftercare services, a person needs a referral from a social worker, a social work department, family/foster family member, or provide a self-referral at any of the drop-in service clinics. A monthly allowance is available to care leavers up to age 23 if a young person is still engaged in full-time accredited training or education at this point. The figures from Tusla show that 75 per cent of care leavers (18–22 years) in receipt of aftercare services are in education/training (Tusla, 2023).

Although care-experienced young people are a distinct group, regarding their life experiences, they have not been included as a target group in the earlier National Access Plans. However, the *Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022–2028* has recognised the needs of specific groups of young people seeking to access higher education, including those who have experience of the care system.

While previous Irish research has explored the pathways of children and young people when leaving school more generally (McCoy et al., 2014), post-school transitions from state care to higher education has received limited policy attention in Ireland (Brady et al., 2019a). This study addresses a gap in research in this area.

1.4   AIM OF THE RESEARCH AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this small-scale exploratory study is to gain a better understanding of the main factors that influence the post-school decision-making of care-experienced students regarding entry to third-level education and the challenges associated with this transition. The study examines the experiences of those young people who progressed into third-level education as well as those whose third-level education was disrupted (i.e. who enrolled in a third-level course and subsequently dropped out) and explores the views of a group of key stakeholders. Drawing on students' lived experiences, the study seeks to inform policy development in supporting care-experienced children when still at school, their post-school transitions as well as offering suggestions as to how best to support these young people. The use of young people's own perspectives highlights various challenges they face in school and beyond, particularly valuable for policymaking in this area. Furthermore, the study provides insights for institutional practices and support services for young people.

The study contributes to the international and national literature on the factors that shape the decision-making processes of care-experienced young people regarding their post-school pathways, an area that is relatively under-explored to

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[8] At present, there are 71 aftercare workers employed by Tusla, holding degrees in areas such as social work and related areas (personal communication from Tusla, 2 April 2025).

date. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does care experience impact on young people's experiences in school?

2. How does care experience impact on young people's interaction with friends, teachers and other school staff?

3. What are the main factors that shape the decision-making process of care-experienced young people regarding their post-school pathways?

4. What are the main challenges care-experienced young people face after leaving school and entering third-level education?

1.5   METHODOLOGY

This small-scale qualitative exploratory study seeks to provide an insight into the challenges faced by care-experienced young people at school and beyond – namely those who have pursued third-level education, and those whose third-level education was interrupted.

1.5.1   Study design

Over the years, policy debate and academic research has grown to recognise the importance of young people's own perspectives and lived experiences. This approach can provide useful insights into the issues that are important for them and helps to inform policy development in an area under discussion. This considered, the present study sought insights from young people with care experience as they progressed through school into third-level education. The young people were chosen based on predefined characteristics (see below), and the questions were designed to shed light on the main factors that influence the post-school decision-making of care-experienced students regarding entry into third-level education.

The study comprised distinct stages:

Stage 1 involved desk-based research on international best practices, regarding state interventions, that have been found successful in supporting care-experienced students' access and retention in higher education settings.

Stage 2 involved primary data collection from care-experienced young people who have pursued third-level education, including higher education. In addition, the study included the perspectives of young people who have dropped out of their course, thus providing an additional and valuable dimension to the study. As the study was not seeking sensitive information related to the reasons for being in care, focus group discussion was considered an appropriate approach for the study. This approach has successfully been used in international research on care-experienced young people (see Ogunshakin et al., 2021; Pinkney and Walker, 2020). These online focus groups were organised with the care-experienced young people from various locations in Ireland. The interviews were digitally recorded

and transcribed and were later analysed by utilising a thematic approach. Thematic analysis enables the researcher to get familiar with the data by coding the content, and to search for patterns or themes across transcripts (Naeem et al., 2023). This is a commonly used technique in analysing interview and focus group data (Xu and Zammit, 2020). In this study, this approach enabled identification of respondents' convergent or divergent views across a number of areas discussed during the interviews and helped to identify issues that the interviewees considered important. The interviewees were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities (see Table 1.1).

Stage 3 involved consultation with the main stakeholders and professionals (e.g. social workers, aftercare managers, foster care association members, university Access programme coordinators and admission officers, guidance counsellors, school completion programme coordinators). The online consultation forum involved presentation of preliminary results from the focus groups, followed by random allocation of the participants into discussion groups. Each group was asked to discuss three topics and the feedback from each group was presented to a larger audience by a self-appointed rapporteur. The results of the forum were incorporated into the report to further shed light on the topic and to include their views in policy implications on how support, access, retention, and success rates for care-experienced students in third-level education in Ireland could be enhanced.

1.5.2 Sample selection

In order to achieve the aim of the study and answer the research questions, input was sought from care-experienced young people who have progressed into third-level education[9] and whose participation in third-level education has been interrupted.[10] The focus group participants were identified and recruited by an advocacy group Empowering People in Care (EPIC). Five online focus groups were conducted, with a maximum of six individuals in each group. In total, 16 young people were interviewed, four males and 12 females, from Munster, Leinster and Connacht. The study targeted young people who had left second-level education and were 18 years of age or older. The age range of the participants was 18–25. Regarding ethnicities, an overall majority were White Irish, some Black African, other Black background, mixed ethnicities and Traveller background.

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[9] In Ireland, third-level education refers to all post-secondary education, including higher education in universities and colleges and further education on Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) and other courses.
[10] See section on limitations of the study.

TABLE 1.1   DESCRIPTIVE DETAILS RELATING TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO PARTICIPATED IN INTERVIEWS

Pseudonym	Gender	Situation at the time of the interview
Mateo	M	In third-level education (PLC)
Theodore	M	In third-level education (university)
Isabella	F	In third-level education (college)
Ava	F	In third-level education (college)
Luna	F	In third-level education (university)
Camila	F	In third-level education (PLC)
Hazel	F	In third-level education (college)
Nora	F	In third-level education (university)
Mila	F	In third-level education (college)
Levi	M	In third-level education (university)
May	F	In third-level education (college)
Lily	F	In third-level education (college)
Ezra	M	Interrupted third-level education (college)
Sofia	F	Interrupted third-level education (college)
Eliana	F	Interrupted third-level education (college)
Willow	F	Interrupted third-level education (college)

Note: All names have been anonymised to protect the identity of participants. Third-level education refers to all education after second-level education, including higher education in universities and colleges as well as further education on Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) and other courses.

The topics (see Appendix for interview schedules) covered in the focus group discussion with care-experienced young people included the following:

- Care placements and settling in at school

- Social experiences at school

- Academic experiences at school

- Decision-making and progression

- Leaving school

- General reflections

The focus groups with care-experienced young people were complemented by an online consultation event including a range of key stakeholders (e.g. social workers, aftercare managers, foster care association members, university Access programme coordinators and admission officers, guidance counsellors, school completion programme coordinators, policymakers) to explore the main issues highlighted by the interviews in greater detail. The event, held on 23 May 2024, was attended by 19 individuals. The stakeholders were identified by their online profile and invited to participate in the event. The participants were randomly assigned into three discussion groups in 'virtual rooms'. The feedback from the groups was recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed.

1.5.3   Ethics and confidentiality

The research design and instrument were approved by a Tusla independent Research Ethics Committee (REC). The proposal to the REC followed specific guidelines. These guidelines apply and an REC review is required where the research relates to the following areas of the Agency's responsibility:

- Potential research participants identified from, or because of their past or present use of services provided by the Agency (including services provided under contract with the private, voluntary or community sectors).

- Potential research participants identified because of their status as relatives or carers of past or present users of the Agency's services.

- Potential research participants identified because of their status as providers of the Agency's services.

The procedures ensure the maximum benefit of the research while minimising the risk of actual or potential harm; and seek to protect, as far as possible, all groups involved in the research, including participants, researchers and research teams throughout the lifecycle of the research[11].

The study also followed standard ethical guidelines applicable to vulnerable groups involving obtaining informed written consent to participate in the study[12]. Furthermore, the interviewer was vetted by An Garda Síochána in accordance with their procedures. As all interviewees were older than 18 years of age, consent was sought directly from them (see Appendix II). The interviewees were assured that the information gathered would be anonymised and the following issues were explained to them:

- No individual will be identified.

- The aim is to identify general themes arising from the interviews.

- The participant can refuse answering questions and is free to terminate the interview at any point.

- The information will be used for research purposes only.

- The data gathered will be stored on a secure network in the offices of the ESRI and will not be taken outside the premises.

- Access to the data is limited only to the researcher working on the project.

1.5.4   Limitations of the study

The study has certain limitations, particularly in terms being a small-scale

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[11] For further information see www.tusla.ie/research/tusla-research-office/research-ethics-committee/guidelines-on-the-functioning-of-tuslas-research-ethics-committee.
[12] This is in line with Guidelines on Ethical Research by the British Sociological Society.

exploratory study with a relatively small sample size of 16 care-experienced young people and 19 key stakeholders. Furthermore, in the selection and recruitment of young people for focus groups, the researcher relied on EPIC to identify and invite care-experienced young people to participate in the study who fell into the following categories: 'in tertiary education', 'interrupted tertiary education' for the study. There were also more females than males in this study, possibly indicating that more females choose to enrol in third-level education. Despite the small number of young people, the participants represented a range of experiences in the education system and enabled this exploratory study to identify factors that are likely to impact on the post-school pathways of this group of young people, particularly regarding their entry to third-level education. However, the findings cannot be generalised to the population of care-experienced young people. Any future research aiming to provide a more comprehensive picture would benefit from a larger number participants, also incorporating the views of these young people who have not progressed to tertiary education, for whatever reason. Regarding stakeholder consultation, there was a good range of individuals representing different organisations and the discussion was exploratory in nature. Future research could explore the perspectives of different groups of key stakeholders (social workers, aftercare workers, guidance counsellors and others) regarding their engagement with care-experienced young people in greater detail. Despite the limitations, the information collected complements earlier research while addressing the gap in research on factors that impact on decision-making about post-school pathways and challenges associated with continuing their education at third level.

1.6   OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 provides information on international best practices that have been considered successful in supporting care-experienced students' education, leaving care and accessing post-school education. Chapter 3 discusses care placements and settling in at school. It looks at coping with challenges regarding these moves, communications between schools and social workers, coping with mental health issues, relationships between foster parents and care professionals. Chapter 4 explores social experiences at schools. It discusses the intersection between care experience and school, sources of support, and making friends. Chapter 5 focuses on academic experiences at school. The topics discussed in this chapter include school attendance, programmes and grades, help with learning, expectations of teachers and other adults. Chapter 6 discusses decision-making of care-experienced young people regarding entry into third-level education, while Chapter 7 focuses on the transition from care to aftercare and third-level education. Chapter 8 summarises the main findings of the study and discusses their implications for the policy development as to how access, retention, and success rates for care-experienced students in Ireland can be enhanced.

CHAPTER 2

Transition of care-experienced young people into higher education: Interventions and best practices

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Considering the importance of educational attainment for further life chances, policies across Europe and beyond have focused on improving access to post-secondary education for young people. However, despite the widening of participation in higher education, gaps still exist between students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more privileged peers (Robinson and Salvestrini, 2020). Much of the existing research to date has indicated that care-experienced children and young people encounter challenges regarding their transition to independent living and adulthood. These challenges apply to a number of domains including employment, education and training, wellbeing and health, finance, accommodation, to name but a few (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Munford, 2022; Alderson et al., 2023; Baker et al., 2023). As shown in the previous chapter of this report, many care-experienced young people have encountered various disruptions and other challenges when still at school and these experiences often shape their post-school aspirations and pathways.

International research has indicated that care-experienced young people who aim to continue their education in further or higher education need continuous and consistent support starting from school and continuing throughout their education (Children's Commissioner, 2024; Gazeley and Hinton-Smith, 2018). This chapter focuses specifically on education of care-experienced young people, exploring interventions that have been successful in supporting care-experienced students' educational career. It is important to note, however, that while lessons can be learned from other countries in terms of successful policies and practices, caution should be applied in 'policy borrowing' (Raffe, 2011) because of contextual differences between countries (O'Donnell et al., 2020). Rather than offering suggestions for 'blueprint solutions', this chapter looks at various international interventions put in place to support care-experienced young people moving through the education system and beyond, to suggest ideas for 'policy learning' in Ireland. While the focus of this chapter is on accessing third-level education, this transition point needs to be considered in the context of earlier educational experiences of young people who have been in care of the state, while taking into account other factors that may have an impact on their educational experiences. The chapter starts with discussing interventions and practices in schools, moving then to discussing leaving care. Section 2.2.3 focuses on supports available for care-experienced young people in higher education. Section 2.3 discusses the supports available for these young people in Ireland. Section 2.4 presents conclusions.

2.2   INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTIONS AND PRACTICES SUPPORTING THE EDUCATION AND WELLBEING OF CARE-EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE

As discussed in Chapter 1, existing research has shown that care-experienced children and young people tend to have lower levels of educational achievement and attainment, compared to their peers who have not been in care. Their experiences in primary and secondary education often impact on access to college and higher education as some young people may not have the required grades or have low post-school aspirations. In order to support young people, the interventions should start early, in primary school. To improve educational aspirations and attainment, across different jurisdictions, various initiatives have been set up to support young people.

2.2.1   Educational support for care-experienced young people in schools

In Canada, **Teach Your Children Well** is an educational intervention aimed at children and young people between six and 13 years of age. The programme includes two components – direct teaching and behaviour management (Evans et al., 2017). The programme can be delivered either at individual level or in small groups, with the duration either 25 or 30 weeks. At individual level, the intervention is usually delivered by foster parents to the child/children in their care and involves three hours of tuition a week in reading and mathematics. In case of small groups, this intervention is delivered by volunteer university students, with care-experienced children receiving two hours of tuition per week. To explore how well this programme has functioned in practice, a randomised control trial at individual level was undertaken (Flynn et al., 2011, 2012). The results showed that the intervention had a positive effect on sentence comprehension and mathematics computation. However, no significant effects were found on reading and spelling. Implementation of the intervention had encountered some challenges, mostly concerning time needed by the caregiver to provide additional tuition, but also the caregiver's health issues, placement changes, carers' views that no additional tuition is needed, or tensions between the child and the caregiver (Flynn et al., 2012). Where additional tuition was provided in small group settings, the programme had some effect on reading, spelling and mathematics computation. No difficulties regarding implementation of the programme were reported by the authors regarding implementing the intervention in a group setting (Flynn et al., 2012).

Delivered by University of Manchester in the United Kingdom, **Success4Life**, launched in 2012, is a programme for care-experienced children and young people 11–16 years of age who are in local authority care with an aim to widen participation and assist in aspiration-building. For ten weeks, the participants are involved in a range of group work activities and themed sessions to develop their confidence and transferrable lifelong skills, as well as raising their awareness of higher education. In order to not interrupt the school day, the sessions take place on campus from 4–6pm on a weekly basis. To provide maximum support, the

programme is delivered to a small group of targeted students with two staff members for each student. The students are nominated either by their teacher at school or their social worker. To facilitate participation, paid transport is provided for the students. The results of the programme evaluations have shown that an overall majority of students who participated in the programme stayed on in education after the age of 16, following GCSE exams and intended to continue their studies in higher education. They also tended to have a better understanding of the higher education sector and courses available therein. Lewis et al. (2015)[13] note that feedback from carers, social workers and students who had availed of the programme was very positive, with the majority of participants reporting their intention to stay at school, apply to enter higher education as well as increased self-confidence.

2.2.2 Support for young people leaving care

Various existing studies have highlighted the challenges care-experienced young people face when leaving care across various dimensions including employment, education, finances and accommodation, among others (O'Donnell et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2021). While still at school, these young people tend to have multiple sources of support, but less support tends to be available for them once they leave the care system. As young care leavers face multiple challenges that often overlap, various interventions have been utilised that provide the necessary scaffolding when entering into adulthood, which for many also means continuing their education. The interventions are all the more important if a young person has complex needs.

Berry Street (Child and Family Services) in Victoria, Australia utilised the **Stand by Me** programme in part of Melbourne, aimed at care leavers with multiple and complex needs. Once the young people turned 16, they could avail of a wraparound pre-exit support, ensuring that each person had a leaving care plan. These young people worked with their personal advisers – a consistent point of support, who provided them with relevant information, implemented and reviewed care leaving plans and acted as a contact person and advocate, facilitating communication between the young person and different support services (e.g. substance abuse, mental health, disability, accommodation) until the young person turned 21 years of age (Purtell et al., 2016). The evaluation of the programme established that the intervention improved outcomes for the care leavers and alleviated 'leaving care anxiety' often experienced by this group (ibid.). When comparing outcomes of young people who had availed of the programme with those who did not, the evaluation showed that as the intervention provided a more holistic support for these young people, it proved to be a particularly important support for those young people who were at the highest risk of homelessness and other adverse outcomes (ibid.). This approach resembles the

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[13] While the evaluation did not involve a control group, the participants filled in pre-project and post-project questionnaires.

aftercare support model available to care-experienced young people in Ireland. Care-experienced children and young care leavers in Ireland are also supported by a rights-based organisation, Empowering People in Care (EPIC), who advocate for their rights[14].

In the United Kingdom, Care Leavers' Social Impact Bond (SIB) is an umbrella programme aimed at supporting young care leavers across various domains: 1) improving their outcomes accessing education, employment or training (EET); 2) exploring new approaches to supporting care leavers; and 3) developing the capacity of local authorities (LAs) to support care leavers. In terms of the first domain – access to education and training, an evaluation of three programmes – **Reboot West, i-Aspire** and **Apollo** was undertaken between 2018–2023[15]. The evaluation incorporated a number of components: a) longitudinal qualitative research with project stakeholders and care leavers; b) monitoring information (MI) data collection and analysis; c) a quasi-experimental impact assessment; and d) a value for money assessment (Davey et al., 2023). All three projects were aimed at care leavers (average age 19.5) who had high-end need, although some differences were highlighted across the interventions in how young people were targeted for the programmes. The results of the evaluation showed that the stakeholders had developed a good understanding of the challenges young care leavers experience when moving to EET. It was acknowledged that for many care leavers, transition into EET is a gradual and staged process, rather than a linear one and that many young people face various barriers while moving into EET. All three projects were considered helpful in supporting young people's post-care transition (Davey et al., 2023). In terms of care leavers themselves, the responses showed that most of them were satisfied with the support they got by participating in the programmes, especially if the support was consistent and young people were able to develop trust and a bond with their support person (Davey et al., 2023). The evaluation showed that support needs to be flexible, as the circumstances and needs of young people tend to change over time. Interagency collaboration in supporting young people in the programme was considered to be a particular strength of the programmes (Davey et al., 2023).

2.2.3   Higher and further education

As discussed in the previous chapter in this report, across Europe, and elsewhere, care-experienced young people tend to be underrepresented in higher education for a number of reasons, including low self-belief and post-school aspirations. Data from the UK indicates that care-experienced young people who have entered higher education can have different experiences – while some find the experience positive, others may face various challenges, may not continue beyond their first year, may spend longer finishing their degree, or achieve lower scores (not 1st or

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[14] For more information about EPIC, see www.epiconline.ie/about-epic.
[15] i-Aspire (South East London) had the largest care leaver population across their three LAs (n = 634); Reboot West (West of England) had the second largest population of 590 care leavers across the four LA areas; Apollo (Sheffield) had the smallest population with 231 care leavers in that LA. It included young people aged 19–21 years.

2:1) (Office for Students, 2021).

With a view to supporting care-experienced young people in accessing higher and further education, the **Springboard** programme, aimed at 16–18-year-olds, was developed in the United Kingdom. The programme aims to develop young people's aspirations regarding their post-school pathway into higher education (Sanders et al., 2021). In order to make this pathway more relatable, a personalised letter is sent from care leavers already in further and higher education to young people still in the care system. Such an approach was seen to encourage young people who were still uncertain about their post-school options to consider continuing their education (Sanders et al., 2021). Furthermore, information was shared about initiatives such as the Propel website, where care leavers can find useful information (e.g. applying, funding options, accommodation, rights and entitlements) about entry into higher end further education. As young care leavers often lack role models regarding their post-secondary education, the website included stories and experiences of care leavers already in further and higher education with a view to develop aspirations among care-experienced young people still at school. Furthermore, the website also offers useful information for teachers, parents and carers, as well as universities and colleges. Young people can use this website for contacting the Care Advice Line, run by Become (the national charity for children in care and young care leavers). In addition to the personalised letter, the Springboard programme also involved the recruitment of a further education/higher education advice and support officer for a year, who offers targeted support and advice to students and professionals about various issues concerning higher and further education. Assessment of the programme indicated that the intervention had a positive impact in encouraging care-experienced young people to access higher and further education (Sanders et al., 2021).

In some cases, initiatives are set up by higher education (HE) providers. For example, **Go Higher West Yorkshire** (GHWY) in the UK is a partnership of 13 higher education providers, working in collaboration in supporting access to, success in and progression from higher education of groups underrepresented in HE. The initiative involves teachers, advisers, carers and employers, to make higher education a viable option for young people. Under the umbrella of GHWY, **Care to Go Higher** offers a nationwide CPD-certified training programme, consisting of six two-hour sessions, to individuals (e.g. foster parents, personal advisers, etc.) working closely with care-experienced young people in supporting them in making informed decisions about entry into higher education and covering topics such as barriers to entering HE, application to HE, support for care-experienced young people, among others. Evaluation of the programme has shown that the participants feel better equipped to assist care-experienced young people in various issues concerning higher education (West Yorkshire, 2024). **The University of York** has put the following pre-entry support in place for care-experienced students (CES): access to a dedicated contact who supports a young person from the point of application throughout to their graduation. This contact person is responsible for providing information about study and courses, is a link between

the young person and the local authority, assists a visit to the university involving free return travel, accommodation and food for the young person and a guest; and is there to offer emotional and practical support throughout the studies[16].

The **Home Comforts** programme was set up by the Sussex Learning Network to support care-experienced students, particularly first-year students, who lacked wider family support. The programme ran from August 2020 to December 2020. The programme collaborated with higher education providers, local authorities, foster carers and care leaving teams to link care leavers with a local family during their time at higher education, thus providing them with an additional support network, particularly over holiday periods, which can be a lonely and difficult time for care-experienced students. Young people were identified by the university student support team and students who were interested in entering the programme were referred to the Home Comforts project leader, who assisted them in filling out a form that helped match them with a family and organised meetings between the young person and the foster family. The process was overseen by the Brighton & Hove Leaving Care Team. Evaluation of the pilot programme has shown that the initiative provided young people with valuable additional support while at university. An interagency support was also seen to develop close links between different organisations: the university, fostering services, and local authority in supporting care-experienced young people[17].

2.2.4 Support for care-experienced youth accessing higher education in Ireland

In Ireland, the number of students studying at higher education institutions has steadily increased over time, including those with lower socio-economic backgrounds and disabilities (Erskine and Harmon, 2023). However, according to the information from the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the progression rates for new entrants following into the academic year show that non-progression rates are lower amongst disadvantaged[18].

Over the years, there has been a drive to encourage young people from disadvantaged and underrepresented backgrounds to access higher education. These young people can apply via the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR), even when they don't have sufficient Leaving Certificate points to access the course of their choice. Students who have been accepted have access to various college-based supports including information about grants and scholarships, study skills and exam preparation, social supports and mentorships, and an orientation programme. Applications can also be made through the Disability Access Route to

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[16] For further information, see www.york.ac.uk/students/support/care-experienced.

[17] For further information, see www.sussexlearningnetwork.org.uk/uploads/case-studies/21%2004%2028%20home-comforts.pdf.

[18] For further information, see https://hea.ie/2025/04/09/latest-student-progression-data-reveals-vast-majority-of-new-entrants-progress-to-the-following-academic-year/#:~:text=Almost%2090%25%20of%202022%2F23%20new%20entrants%20progress%20to,by%20the%20Higher%20Education%20Authority%20a.

Education (DARE) programme, which is meant for young people with disabilities.

Until recently, only limited data has been available on how many care-experienced young people access higher education in Ireland (Brady et al., 2019a). Some information has been available via HEAR, although this is based on self-identification and may not reveal the actual numbers of these young people. In recent years, data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) provide insights into educational attendance and attainment of children in care, reflecting practices in data collection in other jurisdictions such as the UK. The data from the CSO shows that the total proportion of young people 18–23 years of age enrolled in further and higher education was broadly similar for care-experienced young people and their non-care-experienced peers. However, the former were more likely to attend further education courses than higher education courses than the latter. In order to support care leavers in enrolling in higher education, they are now included in the National Access Plan for Higher Education for the 2022–2026.

Financial aftercare support by Tusla is based on assessment of need. Eligible care leavers may receive an aftercare allowance of €300 per week. This is available to care leavers up to the age of 23 if they are enrolled in accredited education or training programmes. The aftercare allowance may include the aftercare grant, which is a once off payment. While Tusla also covers PLC course fees, the government contribution fees are covered by the medical card (Tusla, 2017).[19] In 2023, additional funding was put in place to pay for the accommodation costs for care leavers and members of the Traveller and Roma communities to access higher education. Some funding is also available through the Tusla Bursary Scheme, which is aimed at assisting with higher education course fees. The Student Grant Scheme (SUSI) enables care-experienced students to apply for funding under different categories that are used to decide income considered when calculating income for grant purposes: Dependent Student, Mature Dependent Student or an Independent Student.[20] Overseas courses may also be considered, if no similar course is available in Ireland. However, the cost may not exceed the aftercare allowance available when studying in Ireland (Tusla, 2017).

2.3   CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has looked at international initiatives and programmes devised to support care-experienced children and young people. As outlined in Chapter 1, this group has been found to have lower levels of educational achievement compared to their peers who have never been in care. Much of this can be explained by disrupted care placements, personal circumstances, mental health issues, frequent changing of schools and insufficient support and guidance. Internationally and in Ireland, there has been growing policy focus on disadvantaged or

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[19] Tusla (2017). *Financial support in aftercare*, Dublin: Tusla.

[20] It is now recognised that not all care leavers wish to progress into higher education. Considering this, an Apprenticeship bursary scheme is now also available for this group of young people.

underrepresented students, including care-experienced students, accessing higher education. However, the aspirations to enter higher education and progress through a degree programme may be influenced by their experiences and outcomes while still at school. This chapter has shown that additional support at school (Teach Your Children Well, Success4Life) can improve educational outcomes of care-experienced children and young people and develop their aspirations (Springboard programme). For example, children in long-term foster care who participated in the Teach Your Children Well programme experienced a significant increase in standard scores on reading, decoding and spelling skills. In the UK, care-experienced young people who participated in the Success4Life programme showed an increased desire stay in education post-16 and to apply to university. Availability of relevant information and guidance throughout compulsory education is important in encouraging care-experienced students to consider post-school education. Furthermore, the support needs to be holistic, as care-experienced children and young people are not a homogenous group and can experience different challenges, and some may have complex needs. The recent Take Care resource and accompanying guide developed for Irish schools (see EPIC, 2025) play an important role in informing teachers and principals about the challenges faced by care-experienced children and countering negative stereotypes.

It is important to note that after finishing second-level schooling, care-experienced young people experience a double transition – leaving the care system and entering adulthood with some moving into post-school education. To support young people at this junction in their lives, consistent pre-care exit supports are important (Stand by Me). For example, care-experienced young people in Australia participating in the Stand by Me programme engaged more fully in their transitional and leaving care planning. It is equally important to improve stakeholder awareness of challenges involved in leaving care and enhance interagency collaboration in supporting care leavers (Care Leavers' Social Impact Bond).

Supporting entry into higher education can take many forms – it can involve initiatives and support developed by individual universities or collaboration between various higher education providers and other agencies. An important element in these initiatives is access to a dedicated person that a young care leaver can contact and who can support them throughout their studies with advice and information, and act as a link between the young person and relevant agencies. Furthermore, having access to an additional support network during holidays (Home Comforts programme) could enhance a young person's experiences in third-level education.

CHAPTER 3

Results of the study: Care placements and school experiences

3.1   INTRODUCTION

As discussed in Chapter 1 of this report, some children and young people are not in the care of their parents. The reasons for being in care are many and varied, depending on young person's circumstances and needs. While some young people have continuous and stable care placements, others may experience multiple placements during the time they are in the care system. Changes in care placements can sometimes also mean changing schools and getting used to new teachers and peers. Changes in the environment can be challenging for any young person, but particularly for those in the care system who can feel unsettled or dislocated due to multiple changes in their lives. These challenges can be compounded by poor mental health and wellbeing of some care-experienced children and young people (Parsons et al., 2024). How these and other disadvantaged young people settle in and fare in the new environment can shape their school engagement and post-school trajectories (Frostick et al., 2015).

This chapter starts by discussing the adjustment at school and how young people's care experience influenced this process. Section 3.3 explores communication between schools and social workers and the impact of this on young people. Section 3.4 explores the impact of mental health issues on school experiences, while Section 3.5 discusses the relationship between foster parents and care professionals. Section 3.6 provides conclusions.

3.2   COPING WITH CHANGES – CARE PLACEMENTS AND SCHOOLS

In Ireland, children can be placed in different care environments: foster care (general or relative foster care) – which is the case for an overall majority (88%) of the cases; residential care (general or special care), or other care placements. Half of all young people in care in January 2024 had a single care placement, with 9 per cent having more than five placements (see Chapter 1). The number of care placements of the young people participating in this study varied. While some had just one care placement change when at school, others had several. It was evident from the interviews that different care placements and moving into new communities and schools a number of times can leave young people feeling disorientated and isolated.

> *So, it was a bit **tiring to adjust to different places and meeting different people** like all the time. And then on top of that, to new surroundings as well. It just would be a lot easier to try to find a placement that would kind of work for the same school … **I'd be really recommending that like I would have been kept within the same***

> *community or within the same area. So that I wouldn't have to actually go to **a completely different new school** altogether, because it's hard enough to meet a new family and get used to their rules and their ways. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

> *Moving from (an urban centre) was a big change in itself and I just felt like **in the middle of nowhere**, all you seen was fields around it and it was like isolated. Like you **didn't know anyone**, the whole culture was completely different. And I found it really, especially going into sixth class when it's the very end, when a lot of them have been together for years. And like you know, it does have an impact – like you don't enjoy it as much and you don't really know anyone around and it's **very hard to go into the clicks** that they already have. (May, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

> *The **move in schools was a real sudden shift**. You're going from people you're now somewhat comfortable with, a school you've been in since you're a child to now basically living with strangers, being in a strange place in a strange school. (Theodore, FG1, in third-level education (university))*

> *I was fostered far away from school. I was in (a rural environment) and then I was put in (an urban environment) so it was a bit of **a drastic change** … So, like even moving to different foster homes, it was very hard to kind of manage things and there was a breakdown in one of my second foster placements. (Mila, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

The participants in the consultation event with key stakeholders unveiled the unsettling nature of constant change for some young people that can be a result of placement shortages in the system, reflecting the findings of the recent report by the Child Law Project (CLP) (Corbett and Coulter, 2024) which referred to an acute shortage of appropriate care placements for children. This can mean that if there is a breakdown in the placement, it may not be possible for the young person to stay in the same school. Furthermore, finding another foster family can also prove to be a challenge. The stakeholders felt that as the quality of care varies, this can also have an impact on a young person.

> ***Placement shortages** is a huge issue in the system at the minute. If foster placement breaks down for a child for whatever reason, trying to get another foster placement **close to the school that they're in would be practically impossible**. Never mind trying to get a foster placement. … So, in my view, there's a huge plethora of challenges. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

The care-experienced young people in this study highlighted the importance of the quality of support from foster parents. While many had positive experiences, one person noted that while the foster family endeavoured to support his education,

the situation changed once the family had to address their own issues, with less time and attention given to the young person in their care.

> *Even though in my personal opinion **I was not in a great situation where I was living**, umm, the family had their own issues. You know that would affect the way … I suppose as a foster child, I wouldn't have got the support that you needed maybe. They tried their best to help me with my education, but once their own personal problem started raising, I was kind of pushed out of it. There was **less support, there was less time.** (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))*

The quality of placements emerged as an additional challenge in the consultation event with stakeholders. It was felt that care-experienced young people do not always receive the quality of care that they should, in terms of supporting their education and aspirations.

> *And the **quality of care** that they get, the supports that they might get in terms of supporting their education could be quite different and maybe not up to speed. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

> *The consistency of placements, that's one thing. But actually, **the quality of placements is really important**. … So, [the young people] don't have the knowledge if the family [has] that cultural or social capital that other kids have. So, **their aspirations, their expectations aren't even triggered in the first place**. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

> ***Changes in placements**, obviously that's a huge one. **Changes in school**, I mean, if they can't be maintained in the same school while the placement is changing, that's gonna be a huge challenge. Changes in carers, **changes in the quality of care**, enormous challenges, I think. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

In some cases, there can be a breakdown of a care placement, and a subsequent need to move into a new school. Having to change foster families can be stressful for a young person and can also impact on their level of connectedness and engagement at the new school.

> *I had to meet a new family and that was stressful enough, and that stress would have impacted how I would have met new people in school and [I would be] **worrying about meeting new people all the time** in my new schools. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

For some of these young adults, having experienced multiple placements can have an enduring impact on their lives and transition into independent living and college.

> *So, even like **moving to different foster homes, it was very hard to kind of manage things** and there was a breakdown in one of my foster*

placements. **So that had a big impact on me coming into college.** *So, by the time I reached college, I would have been in like five foster homes already. (Mila, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

Similar sentiments were expressed by Ezra, who had also experienced various moves during the time he was at school. Constant change had an adverse impact on his adjustment to routine and added to difficulty in making friends. Mental health issues further magnified the challenges of this young person.

*I was in two different secondary schools, and I was in maybe four different primary schools in my time in foster care, and even before that, my primary schools before I was in foster care were always changing. So, I found it **very difficult to adapt to school** and to routine. I found it **hard to make friends**. And a lot of it did boil down to **mental health motivation**. And confusion, not knowing where to go in life, let alone after secondary school. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))*

According to some interviewees, age mattered, with the participants finding the adjustment process easier at a younger age.

*So, in terms of the settling in process, while it was difficult, I also do acknowledge **it's good that it happened while young**. Because I think if that had happened to me in the teenage years, I would have found that a lot more difficult … like I would have been a bit more set in my ways. (Theodore, FG1, in third-level education (university))*

Another factor that impacted on the settling in process was the timing of the change of schools. For example, one of the school changes that Hazel experienced coincided with starting school with everybody else and hence not being perceived as a 'new' student, an experience she had in primary schools.

*So, when I went into secondary school, I was kinda lucky because **I started as everyone else was starting**, so the primary school placements were quite difficult because I'd have to go in and the whole year had already been starting and I'd have to make new friends (Hazel, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

In some cases, efforts were made to keep a young person in the same school, following a change in care placement. However, the distance between the new foster family and school the student attended resulted in the young person having to opt for remote learning.

*For me, I had kind of a unique experience because I moved at the very beginning of my sixth year in secondary school. So, I actually didn't end up moving schools. I actually **ended up having to do online schooling**, which was kind of difficult because I just moved to a completely different area. It was like a two-and-half-hour drive to come to school. (Ava, FG1, in third-level education (college))*

In other cases, care placement changes occurred very suddenly, causing a 'jarring effect' for the young person.

> I was **informed of being moved like the Friday beforehand and I was moved on Monday**, so as soon as I got home from school we just took all our stuff and then went to the new place and I feel like that can be quite, I don't know, jarring to not know anything about the new people that you're gonna go and live with. (Luna, FG1, in third-level education (university))

The interviews highlighted the precarious nature of being in care as in many cases young people need to adapt to new care and school environments multiple times, thus making it challenging for young people to settle into both contexts.

3.3 LACK OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND SOCIAL WORKERS

Difficulties in settling in at school were also associated with limited or lack of communication between the social workers responsible for supporting the young person, and the schools. When Luna had to change schools, the situation was not handled very well by the target school, thus making the young person feel uncomfortable.

> And she [deputy principal] was saying to me **how she was very angry with the social workers, that she hadn't been informed** that I'd be moving placement … but I remember **feeling at that time kind of conflicted because I really liked my social worker** … I think everybody who's in the child's life needs to be informed about the big changes that are happening. (Luna, FG1, in third-level education (university))

At times, lack of communication can also be due to abrupt changes in care placements, leaving little space for the social workers to inform the schools about the arrival of a new student. However, as seen in the case of Ava, not informing the student's old school about the placement change weeks after the student had left indicates that there is room for improvement in sharing information about the changes in students' lives.

> In my secondary school **my teachers weren't informed**, and it … was literally the previous Friday I had got told. And by the Tuesday I had moved, and it was a case that the teachers hadn't seen me, like **the teachers didn't even know where I was** … I basically disappeared for like three weeks and then the school got a phone call from the social workers because they needed I think an address or something like that. … There is definitely a need to inform the schools. (Ava, FG1, in third-level education (college))

3.4   COPING WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Some young people in this study spoke about dealing with mental health issues, which they considered added further challenges to their experiences at school and beyond. For Ava (FG1), having ADHD made it difficult to keep focused while at school, especially with limited support. Other young people also felt that more support was needed to assist young people with mental health issues, as lack of such support may result in them withdrawing from education.

> *I know a lot of people that are in care do suffer from **mental health and stuff** … You know, like there just needs to be more support there, … they **don't have that one person that they could go to** and ask them for … So, like **a lot of them do drop out of education because of that**, and I wouldn't blame them for a drop. (May, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

> *A lot of it did come down to a lot of moving, not a lot of guidance, not a lot of the support for my academics and my mental health there. There was pretty much **no help for mental health**. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))*

Stress, associated with turning 18 and having to make choices regarding continuing their education as well as having personal issues, changes in care settings and schools allied with lack of guidance and support with mental health were all seen to exacerbate mental health issues for some young people.

> *And when I turned 18, I got an aftercare worker, and I still did not know what I wanted to do. And I was pressured into going to college, even though I didn't want to. And I didn't know what I wanted to do, and it was **affecting my mental health** at the time, and it was making my anxiety really bad and other things were really bad at the time. (Willow, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

> *I had **personal issues. Depression**. You know, I felt **very unmotivated** for anything at school. I started slacking with homework. I started slacking with schoolwork. I was falling asleep in classes, and I just wasn't where I need to be. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))*

The consultation event with the stakeholders revealed issues around support in mental health, learning difficulties and disabilities for care-experienced young people. It was generally felt that difficulties accessing assessments, delayed diagnosis, and missed assessments due to placement changes can impact the experiences of these young people in the education system.

> *The **mental health** side of things. That, and the **learning difficulties**. You can't underestimate how many students need extra support with that stuff. And there are often waiting lists and there are often difficulties accessing educational assessments, et cetera, et cetera. And that can have a ripple effect then, going forward in their*

*education system … I would say **the mental health and the learning support piece is under-resourced.** (Stakeholder consultation group)*

*Disabilities, whether that would be specific learning difficulties, mild learning, intellectual, would all play a part in **challenges for young people who are in the education system**. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

*The mental health issues, the disabilities, the learning difficulties – all of those **can be under-resourced, underserved**. There can be difficulties in getting assessments. The, you know, assessments and issues can be missed because people are moving placements. [Young people are] not engaging, they're not attending. So, there's massive scope for **needs not being met**, shall we say. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

The interviews and a consultation group discussion demonstrated that more support should be available for young people who struggle with their mental health. The views of the participants echo previous Irish research, which found that multiple placements tend to interfere with schooling and contribute to ongoing psychological difficulties of young people (McElvaney et al., 2013).

3.5 CARE PLANNING, RELATIONSHIPS WITH FOSTER PARENTS AND CARE PROFESSIONALS

Young people in care are required to have a care plan that details the actions needed to support their needs and development. Interviews with young people and the consultation discussion highlighted the importance of care planning, which was considered 'probably very hard to plan' but 'necessary' (Theodore, FG1, in third-level education (university)) The consultation discussion revealed that more could be done in the care planning phase to support young people. In particular, more emphasis could be placed on the personal and social development aspect that would support young people as they leave the care system.

*I've been part of the journey of a number of young people through their care journey and in their care planning. And there's always an emphasis on, you know, the health education and the care planning. But **I don't think there's enough [of] an emphasis on the personal social development, self-efficacy and confidence** of young people in care as well. So that when they are coming to college, they feel like they belong there. That they can achieve, they will achieve, that they expect more and want more. And unfortunately, I don't think that self-efficacy or belief is always inherent in the young person with care experience, that they don't feel like they can achieve or should achieve. So, can we include that in their care planning? (Stakeholder consultation group)*

As discussed in Chapter 1, the relationship between the young person and their foster family is important for the outcomes of care-experienced children and young people. Young people in this study generally had positive experiences with their foster families. Those with supportive foster care placement seemed to cope better with settling in the school and having aspirations for the future. In some cases, foster parents were also a consistent support for the young person in their care, particularly in case of frequent changes of the social workers.

> *For me, my foster mom, she was on the parents committee team, so she kind of **knew all the teachers and communicated with them on a regular basis** about what is happening and what I was facing and I think that was really good. So, I had a really positive experience in that. Yeah. Always pushing to just do something with your life. Have like a plan, have the vision and go for it. Like whether that be doing like an apprenticeship, going to work or getting education, just do something that would benefit your life (Eliana, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

> *I had **a good relationship with my foster parents**, so it was kinda like they were pushing me to do well in school, but then I had **a different social worker after nearly every six months**, and they didn't understand my struggles with school and my learning disabilities. So, they were kind of like pushing me beyond what I could actually do. My foster parents were trying to explain to them, but then my social worker would change and it would be the whole thing again. So, they kind of just got fed up. (Willow, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

However, it was acknowledged by some young people that not all foster families were supportive of their educational participation and engagement.

> *Again, different families were different. They had different attitudes. **Some didn't really care if I came home and finished the homework**. I did make sure I had it done, kind of towards the end of my placement years and education was key. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

The interviews also showed that good communication between the social worker and school principal supported a smooth transition for the young person. In cases where a young person experienced a number of care placements, the social worker was the one constant adult in their lives.

> *Well, when I went to the different primary schools, my **social worker had already kind of sorted it out with the principal**. They knew that they were gonna kind of do it slowly, so that I wasn't just thrown into the school the first day. Like I was prepared. It was good that way, that they did that transition for me. They helped me move in more, but then kind of as you get older, it's different. (Hazel, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

> *I mean, I've had loads of different families, you know, and they all work different in every kind of way. I had **my support worker**. She was a great support for me and that **one person that I needed all the time**. She was there. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

However, not all young people had positive experiences with their social workers. Some did not find their social workers very helpful or had minimal contact with them.

> *So, like **they weren't very helpful** and it was kind of like a whole social work situation, because I just felt like I had no one to talk to, that would actually listen. (Mila, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

> *Yeah, maybe the last three-and-a-bit years of my time in foster care, **I wasn't getting a lot of visits from my social worker**. I wasn't getting a lot of, you know, support from the outside. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))*

Willow (FG5, interrupted third-level education (college)), who had learning difficulties, felt that having one constant social worker would have benefitted her more: 'Like growing up, to have a social worker that they can connect with, not to change all the time.'

Young people noted that it was preferable to have support from the social worker 'behind the scene'. One young person noted that having social workers coming to school is likely to draw unnecessary attention to them, thus making it more difficult to adjust to the school and peer group.

> *I don't think social workers should be going there, to school, unless it's like, really serious, because automatically you're being talked about. They'll see someone walking. And if you're right beside them, they're obviously gonna put two and two together and know about it. So, I just think **they should refrain from going into the schools as much as they can**. (May, FG3, in third-level education (college))*

The turnover of social workers meant that it was difficult to develop a bond with them.

> *Within the last ten years of me being in care, from age eight to 18, I had about I think **one social worker every year**. So, **I wasn't really attached to them.** I was actually blessed to have very committed foster parents who I was with the whole entire time. (Eliana, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

The young people in this study had received help from various people at school, such as special needs assistants (SNAs), guidance counsellors and teachers. Getting to know the young person, they were able to provide appropriate support.

> *I had **an SNA** in school, so that was very beneficial for me, and I was able to kind of say: oh can I leave the class for a bit to take a break if I needed because I would get very … I had a lot of anxiety as a child, so*

I have to, you know, step out and leave the classroom. And they were OK with that. (Hazel, FG2, in third-level education (college))

*I think they were kind of guidance counsellors or, you know, just **school support**. They did help me. They gave advice. I started going to the lunches after school, before, after school studies, I started eating there in the morning. Because I was just very unmotivated with a lot of stuff … I do remember there were at least three teachers who I did feel comfortable talking to about, maybe not exactly what was going on, but that I was in a difficult situation. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))*

*Usually, if you try or even though it's hard to do so, you may find a very good adult to support you. So, for example, that could be your guidance counsellor, your SNA. And for me, that would have been certain **teachers**, of subjects that I would have had been very good at and very interested in. Naturally, you may feel more inclined to speak with those teachers, you know. You have some sort of connection to fall back on. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

In some cases, young people who had developed a good relationship with a person at school, continue communication even after finishing school.

*And I had **a guidance counsellor** in school. She was very helpful. It's funny because I still talk to her today and she always used to, like, help me out with stuff. Especially when it came to, let's say, problems at home. She was trying to help calm me down at times. So, I kind of felt a bit more like warm and comfortable when I was speaking to her. (Mila, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

Another source of support was an EPIC advocate.

In terms of the adults who supported me while in care, I suppose, firstly, I think obviously my EPIC advocate would have been a huge support for my education throughout, which I think was very important because it just backs you up when you're speaking to social workers and it's a huge support. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))

However, in some cases, schools may handle a young person's personal situation in a very insensitive way, as is demonstrated by Lily.

*Like I know I didn't have the social worker coming in, but my **year head** knew [about a sensitive issue concerning the child]. Somebody had told her, and she went and said it to the whole lot, to school like, the whole year. She called everyone in from the year and spoke to everyone before she spoke to me. So, everybody ended up knowing through that. (Lily, FG3, in third-level education (college))*

3.6   CONCLUSIONS

This chapter explored the factors that influence care-experienced young people's school adjustment. In line with international research on the topic, the results of this study indicate that young people's school engagement appears to be related to the number of care place moves that sometimes dovetail with the change of schools. Change of schools may also reflect care placement shortages in Ireland, whereby it may prove challenging to find another foster family near the school that the child attends, in case of placement breakdown. Multiple moves may have an adverse impact on a young person's ability to adjust to new routines and rules, their educational outcomes, ability to form interpersonal relationships and their wellbeing. While consistency of placements is important, so is the quality of the placements. Proactive and supportive foster parents play a key role in supporting the education of young people in their care and helping them in developing aspirations for their future.

In addition to the foster parents, social workers can play an important role in supporting care-experienced young people, including help with adjusting to a new school. High turnover of social workers that some young people in this study referred to may reflect the fact that the work of social workers is challenging, especially when they may be supporting several young people. This may contribute to communication between social workers and school personnel being sometimes insufficient. This is particularly problematic when a care-experienced young person has multiple and complex needs. Ineffective communication between schools, foster families and social workers could also reflect the turnover of the latter.

International research has highlighted the importance of one key adult in the lives of children growing up in adverse circumstances. At school level, various staff members were seen as a source of help and support, including teachers, guidance counsellors and SNAs. However, the results of this study suggest that mental health and learning support may currently be under-resourced, as shown in other recent research with second-level school students (Carroll et al., 2024).

In terms of the experiences of young people who were pursuing third-level education and those whose third-level education was interrupted, the findings show that there were no notable differences between the two groups. Individuals in both groups found different care placements and moving into new communities and schools challenging. Experience of mental health issues and personal challenges seem to have contributed to interrupted education for some young people, something that could be explored more in detail in future research. Other factors that may also have contributed to interrupted education included not having sufficient guidance and support at school and feeling reluctant to pursue third-level education. Future research could focus on a group of care-experienced young people who had not decided to pursue third-level education.

CHAPTER 4

Social experiences at school

4.1   INTRODUCTION

Chapter 3 demonstrated that for children in care, their care placements and experiences at school are closely entwined. As young people spend much of their daily lives at school, their experiences are shaped by everyday interactions with teachers and their peers. For children and young people in care, their journeys through primary and second-level schools are often disrupted by multiple care placement and school changes. Such experiences are likely to have an impact on their social interactions at school and shape their attitudes towards school and school engagement. Some young people may be particularly sensitive to how they are being treated as a consequence of their care experience. Existing research has shown that good relationships with teachers, foster parents, carers and peers tends to make their school experiences more positive.

This chapter explores which factors impact on the social sphere of care-experienced young people. The chapter begins with a discussion about the need for sensitivity when providing support for care-experienced young people in schools. Section 4.3 focuses on student-teacher relationships and the impact of the nature of this relationship on young people. Section 4.4 discusses the quality of relationships with foster parents and care professionals, while Section 4.5 highlights the challenges many care-experienced young people face when making friends at school. Section 4.6 highlights some of the measures that young people have found helpful in settling in at school. Section 4.7 provides conclusions.

4.2   IDENTIFICATION OF CARE-EXPERIENCED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

For many young people in this study, liking or disliking school was associated with their experience of being in care and the attitudes and practices of staff and peers. While the interviewees acknowledged that it was good to know that the school staff cared about them, additional attention from teachers sometimes made them feel 'different' rather than a 'normal' student.

> I didn't want to have any [additional attention]. I just **wanted to be normal as everyone else**. I didn't want them to try and say I couldn't do this or I couldn't do that because of the situation I had been in … I didn't want to be 'the one' – 'Oh yeah, she's the one that's in foster care'. I wasn't ashamed about it, but it wasn't something I needed everyone to know. (Hazel, FG2, in third-level education (college))

While Hazel was not ashamed of her care status, other young people felt self-conscious, or even embarrassed about their circumstances. Levi felt that being a

young teenager and self-conscious, being in care can influence social interactions at school and education in general.

> *You want to be **a normal child**. But I think you want to have a boundary, a healthy boundary, or maybe just kind of … some sort of division between your care status and all of that kind of traumatic stuff that has happened to you, and then being a student and that normal part of life that every teenager goes through, going through education. I myself, while I was in care, **I was very embarrassed** of my care status. Of course, that isn't the case anymore, but I think when you're a young teenager and you're self-conscious and stuff like that and what has been said and how professionals react to you, I think that has a very profound impact on your experience and education. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

Similar points were made by stakeholders in the consultation group who felt that schools need to show more sensitivity around the identity of care-experienced young people at school.

Some school procedures can draw attention to the young people and may be embarrassing for them. In some cases, it may be that the staff at school may not be sufficiently trained in how to approach situations that may arise with care-experienced students.

> *An experience that I would have, trying to sign out of school, I found **very embarrassing** … I had to go through three people to sign out of school, which, you know, was very stressful at the time. Having to stand for 40 minutes in the corridor trying to get X, Y and Z to line up together. So, you know, you want to be a normal child, and I think what it highlights is maybe **the need for training of professionals that are working with children**. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

While the participants in the stakeholder consultation agreed that more sensitivity is needed regarding the identity of the care-experienced child or young person and how schools should address this, the discussion also revealed the complexities involved, depending on the level of support the child needs. While some children may be in stable situations and experience very few issues, if any, others may have high-end needs.

> *There can be, I suppose, **issues around disclosure** whether a child or young person discloses that they're in care, particularly in third level, but I suppose in second level as well. This could be communicated to a principal, but maybe the whole staff mightn't be aware of the needs of the child. So that issue around the difficulty around knowing who's affected … to be able to offer support and the level of support needed. And that's quite mixed, I suppose, from children in care, because you can have children that are in very stable environments and children that are in an absolute crisis. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

When asked whether teachers at school should be aware of the care background of young people, the interviewees' opinions varied. On the one hand, some young people thought that if school staff are made aware that a young person was in care, their attitude to them may change, they will be treated differently, and this will then be noticed by their peers. On the other hand, it was also felt that teachers should be aware of the challenges some children experience, in order to provide support for the young person.

> *After they are told, they kind of get a bit … they **treat you differently**.*
> ***You don't want that**. You want to be treated like everybody else, in a*
> *sense, because when you're starting to be treated differently then it's*
> *noticed by your peers. It's noticed by your friends … and then once*
> *that's noticed, that's when you start to get singled out … I don't think*
> *[making the care background known is] necessary, unless there's*
> *issues with attending school, or there's issues with transport and*
> *getting to school and getting to different places. Unless there's issues*
> *like that, then I don't think that it's necessary whatsoever. (Lily, FG3,*
> *in third-level education (college)*

> *Of course, [teachers] should maybe have a knowledge of the*
> *challenges and adversity you face as a care-experienced young person.*
> *But I would be careful of kind of [showing support] to an extent that*
> *will **lead to maybe special treatment**. (Levi, FG2, in third-level*
> *education (university))*

As noted in Chapter 1, care-experienced children and young people are a heterogenous group and have different circumstances and views. While many young people wanted to separate their care experience from their school lives, others did not see awareness among teachers about their care background as an issue. However, there seemed to be a consensus among the interviewees that care-experienced young people should not be treated differently, so that it will be noticed by their peers.

4.3   RELATIONSHIPS WITH TEACHERS

Existing research has highlighted the important role teachers play in the experiences of young people and their school engagement (Johnston et al., 2021). The interviews with care-experienced young people revealed that overall, such relationships were good.

> *You can find teachers who, for example, if they know that you're in*
> *care, they will **really try their best to bring you up** and to help you*
> *catch up. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

> *I actually **got on with the teachers**, so I did, but there was always, you*
> *know, one or two that were a bit difficult. Well, you know, the majority*
> *of the teachers were nice and really helpful. (Isabella, FG1, in third-*
> *level education (college))*

Young people felt that it was easier to connect with some teachers more than others. The interviewees noted that it was easier to form a closer relationship with those teachers whose classes they enjoyed. Receiving help and support from the teachers was greatly appreciated by the young people.

> And **the majority of [teachers] were fantastic**. There was one or two teachers … and I suppose that goes for everybody. Like there's always one or two, you know … But like all I ever had to do was just ask for help … So, they provided that for me, not a bother. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))

Several young people highlighted the importance of teachers understanding their circumstances and challenges and being understanding and supportive. Some teachers had made every effort to keep the student motivated and addressed their difficulties with schoolwork.

> They were **very understanding** and that **really made a massive impact on my education**. (Eliana, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))

> The main teachers, **they understood**. And they wouldn't exactly be hard on me. But they would say, at least pay attention, you know, don't be falling asleep during classes and take down the notes from the board, so that you can see what was going on. If you can't pay attention during class, even just simple things like doing my assignments online so I'm not writing that much. **They tried to give a small bit of a push**. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))

In some cases, the interviewees had maintained contact with their favourite teacher even after finishing school.

> Yeah, I also had a good teacher that used to be **very friendly with the students**, you know? And used to help us a lot. I also **have like a good bond with them**. And up to now, I have a contact with him. From time to time, [I'd let him] know what I'm doing [and he'd] help me. Like, how's college right now? He asked a lot about my life. You know, he was a good teacher. (Mateo, FG1, in third-level education (PLC))

Two of the interviewees had participated in the School Completion Programme (SCP) and they found the staff of SCP very supportive and encouraging.

> It was just one teacher who basically, like **encouraged me to stay in school** because I was getting so sick and tired of sixth year and everything like that. I was at risk of becoming an early school leaver. She'd just take me out of class once a week and kinda encouraged me really. To do my best and all that. So yeah, **that programme [SCP] was a great support when I was in school.** (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))

*I did a School Completion Programme, and **I had a teacher who I was pretty close with**. I had like one session with her every week, and we talked about things going on at home, things going on at school. If I needed any extra assistance and stuff like that, when I brought it up to her, she would just kind of notice the attendance was dropping and I'd be like, yeah, it's becoming difficult to attend school. (Camila, FG1, in third-level education (PLC))*

Negative interaction with a teacher, particularly when happening in front of the whole class, sometimes resulted in a young person not wanting to go to school.

*And with this teacher in particular, like – **she did pick on me** … making very, you know, smart comments and just making it difficult for me and, sort of **making fun of me in front of the whole class** … So, because of that like, I just didn't really want to go to school. You know, I felt embarrassed. I **dreaded going to her classes** every single day … I ended up dropping the whole module altogether, because of how horrible she was, and I just didn't want to do it anymore. (Isabella, FG1, in third-level education (college))*

Some young people felt that not all school staff were sensitive to their care background. Luna noted that curiosity of some teachers regarding the reasons for being in care was presented as an offer to support the young person, leaving her feeling that the teacher may have had an ulterior motive in offering support.

*I just want to mention that I had really lovely teachers mostly … So, when I actually went to school, first [the staff member] pulled me out of a few classes. Kind of sporadically, kind of saying that they wanted to support me, but it wasn't. It was really that **they just wanted to know why I was in care** … and she **asked very intrusive questions** … she was basically pulling that all out of me … So, yeah, I think just more training for teachers in that sense would be good. (Luna, FG1, in third-level education (university))*

Luna argued that teacher training and continuous professional development needs to provide future teachers with necessary skills regarding how to interact with care-experienced children and young people.

Some staff members were also seen as having negative stereotypical views on children and young people in care. The principal in Isabella's school seemed to assume that all care-experienced young people can be 'trouble'. Isabella felt that the way she was spoken to was very insensitive and showed a lack of understanding and care. Like Luna, Isabella argued that teachers need to be more aware as to how to communicate with care-experienced young people and how to support them.

I'll never forget going to that school. I went into school like that Monday or something, and the principal came around to me and said: 'Well, now all that is in the past. All the bad stuff that has happened.

> Now *I expect you to behave now in school*'. You know, just being very like *insensitive with the knowledge,* as she knew what occurred … You know, so definitely [teachers] need to be more informed … Teachers need to know and just learn how to be very sensitive and how to approach children in care and just *not label them all as troublemakers* … So, they *need to be trained, they need to be more aware, they need to be a lot more sensitive. (Isabella, FG1, in third-level education (college))*

Similar sentiment was expressed by Levi, who also felt that some teachers lack sufficient understanding of the challenges experienced by children in care and how these experiences, which are often out of their control, can impact on their school engagement and attendance. Subsequently, teachers may have low expectations of them as they assume that these young people have no interest in education.

> … When you have young people who are care-experienced and they have experienced trauma, so maybe their level of attendance at school is very poor … *that doesn't reflect their dedication at all to education.* I think it's just the chaotic environment that they are in at that moment. I would be concerned that maybe some teachers may put care-experienced students into that group of students that … aren't interested in education. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))

In addition to being better informed about what it means to grow up in care, and how this may impact on a young person's school attendance and school engagement, it was also felt that teachers need to be more trauma-informed, reflecting the experiences of some children and young people in care. 'I believe that being more trauma informed in the teaching profession will never be to your detriment.' (Theodore, FG1, in third-level education (university))

Similar points were made by stakeholders in the consultation group. The stakeholders argued that teachers in primary and secondary schools need to be aware of the challenges some care-experienced young people encounter. Some have experienced traumatic events that may have had an adverse impact on the young person. By knowing what approach to take with the young person who has had such an experience, teachers would be able to put in place appropriate support for the young person, to provide them with additional 'scaffolding'.

> [Better preparation is needed] in primary and secondary schools where *teachers are not trauma informed*. I suppose the teacher at the top of the room may not always know that or know what they should do to support those children. The impact of trauma on children and young people, we know that for a child to be in care, there would most likely be numerous traumas in their life and they will *impact their future outcomes*. So, you know, that means that there is *that additional level of support that's required for those children or young people* because they're facing [different] challenges as everyone else.

> *It is much harder. So there needs to be more scaffold. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

The teachers need to be aware that while having individual life challenges, care-experienced young people are 'a unique group' of people who also encounter similar difficulties moving through the education system. Dealing with these situations and supporting care-experienced young people needs to be done sensitively and with compassion.

> *[Teachers need to] know we're a unique group of people. Not everybody experiences life in care and a lot of people will not be able to relate to it or understand or, you know, have that feeling of being moved and you know, new people and new rules and new cousins, new aunts and just all that type of stuff … They **need to be more informed and a lot more sensitive and understanding**. (Isabella, FG1, in third-level education (college))*

Previous research in Ireland and abroad has highlighted the importance of the teacher-student relationship in student engagement. Overall, the interviewees in this study had positive relationships with their teachers and found most of them helpful and supportive. However, some young people felt that some teachers picked on them and perceived them as potential 'troublemakers'. While young people felt that teachers should be more aware of the challenges experienced by children in care and have the necessary knowledge and skills to support them, some of the interviewees did not wish to be identified as care-experienced – thus revealing a tension in this area.

4.4 RELATIONSHIPS WITH FOSTER PARENTS AND CARE PROFESSIONALS

In addition to support from teachers and other staff at school, many young people also mentioned the importance of having supportive and caring foster parents, social workers and other care professionals in assisting them at school and beyond. For Ava, (FG1, in third-level education (college)) who was not in school and had lost a purpose in life, it was her foster parents who got her a job. Getting over a difficult period, Ava was thereafter able to pursue a third-level education course. In the same vein, Theodore's (FG1, in third-level education (university)) foster parents supported his education and made sure he had support from a social worker who was instrumental in ensuring his move between schools.

Levi (FG2, in third-level education (university)) identified EPIC advocates and mentors from sport and volunteering as an additional source of support. Some young people also got support from their relatives. 'He [a relative] has always been there to help and kind of push me towards, you know, future success.' (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))

> *I think **my sister** was my biggest support because [she would] always like push me to do things when I'd say that I couldn't because she knew*

that I could. She would always help me with my homework or subjects I was struggling with. (Willow, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))

Young people participating in the study had varied experiences with their social workers. Some had the same dedicated social worker while moving through the education system, who was also their advocate. 'I had a support worker from the age of 13 or 12 up to 18, and the same one. She was really good. She gave me a voice.' (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college)) For another young person, their social worker facilitated his move from one school to another. 'She helped the transition by not having a gap between the schools – even though it is a massive distance, and the social worker had to travel 27 kilometres to and from every morning. She did this till I started a new school which helped the consistency, which again meant that settling in process was a lot easier. (Theodore, FG1, in third-level education (university))

However, others felt that they had no trust in their social worker, especially if these individuals were also dealing with other people that the young person knew. 'I just had no trust [in her] whatsoever.' (May, FG3, in third-level education (college)) Some young people like Lily felt that some social workers are not particularly helpful and do not always provide the support the young person needs.

> *Those **jobs are meant to be for people who want to help kids like us** who are struggling. Not so that you can fill out paperwork and get your pay at the end of the week. That's not what the job is for. The job is for people who care, because if you don't care, how are you meant to work in a care facility for kids who need that care because they're not getting it elsewhere? (Lily, FG3, in third-level education (college))*

The stakeholder consultation discussion highlighted the challenges involved in resources invested in the social work sector, often resulting in a frequent turnover of social workers and inability of the child to form a bond of trust with the person. Changes in social workers may also mean that there is a limited understanding of the circumstances of children they are assigned to. Furthermore, shortage of social workers may leave a care-experienced child without additional support.

> *… the **shortage in social workers** … she [a participant] knew of one child recently who's age seven and has had seven different social workers. So, you know, the ripple effect of that. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

> *There's a lot of change with social work I found when kids were under 18. So that **continuity was really a key**. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

> *And then of course, the difficulty now is that **some children in care don't even have a social worker,** and there's just such a shortage in the system. And **retention is an enormous issue**. So, I think that's bound to have a ripple effect that somebody hasn't got an overview,*

particularly if there are changes in placement. If the child doesn't have a consistent social worker, how can their educational needs, never mind any other needs, be fully met and fully addressed? (Stakeholder consultation group)

High turnover and low retention of social workers may reflect the fact that the work of social workers is challenging, especially when supporting young people with a higher level of need. The social workers may also lack necessary knowledge about how to support the more complex cases. Furthermore, these individuals often need to fight for resources for the young people in their care.

*If you're working in trauma spaces and very emotionally charged spaces, like **it's a hard role**. And they **don't always have the tools to do their job** either. Like, you know, the therapeutic placements, the residential placements, foster placements, the counselling services. And if you don't have the tools to do your job, I think that can be quite hard or difficult to be in that space, constantly fighting for resources or priorities. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

The interviews highlighted the importance of support from foster parents and care professionals, such as social workers. Consistent support from them helps young people to maintain a routine in learning, and supports their engagement with education. While most young people had positive experiences with their foster parents and care professionals, the discussion with the stakeholders revealed that there is room for improvement, particularly regarding the number of social workers available and their skill levels.

4.5   RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS

International research has highlighted the importance of friendships for children and young people, including those in care. Many young people in this study found it difficult to make new friends, mostly because of a number of school changes that often coincided with new care placements. Many missed the friends they had left behind. Furthermore, the process can be more difficult for a more introverted person.

*I dreaded going into school every day because I'm not a person who likes change or new things, so it was like, I have to learn new rules about the school or find my way around the school, new classrooms, new subjects, new people … So, like **everyone had already, you know, made their clicks, made their friends from first year**, they've already known each other, already had their little groups, and then there was this like new girl coming in towards the end of the year that nobody knew. (Camila, FG1, in third-level education (PLC))*

***I would miss my friends** from the city. Like the friends I made in primary school, and I knew that I had to change to a new school. But I was sad about it. (Nora, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

For Mateo, making new friends was even more challenging as he had moved to Ireland from another country. Mateo also had to adjust to the new environment, as he had not been at school in his country of origin.

> *It was like **a little bit hard for me to make friends** and you know at the beginning. And it was like a new thing to me. Like I never have been in school also in my country before. (Mateo, FG1, in third-level education (PLC))*

Some interviewees felt that the timing of school changes was important in settling in and making new friends. If changing schools coincided with the start of secondary school, which means a change of school in general, the care-experienced young people share their adjustment experience with their peers. Further difficulty may arise from the fact that the young person may not be certain how long they will stay in the new school. 'I didn't know how long I was going to stay in that placement, so I didn't even know if these friendships would last.' (Hazel, FG2, in third-level education (college))

The age at which people move schools can also be important with regards to the ease at which children connect with their peers. Nora felt that making friends was easier at a younger age, as the peers are more accepting. Whereas at an older age, peer relationships can be more complex. In Nora's case, being in care was not something that was talked about.

> *So, for me, **when I was young, making friends was fine** because as you're young, you're kind of oblivious to things … but when you go into secondary school, then it's like people are aware, but they won't really acknowledge it – what they think. It was strange in that kind of way, and so I did make friends, but it was very obvious that they knew that something was not the norm. They would be my friend, and we'd have a ball and all of that, but we would never acknowledge that. (Nora, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

Care-experienced young people may sometimes confront other issues when interacting with their peers and may or may not be included in peer group activities. Subsequent social isolation at school had an adverse effect on Mila, who felt that her experiences with peers at secondary school may have contributed to some of her challenges.

> *When I was in secondary school, **I felt very segregated from everyone else** because it was like: 'Oh, she's different'. Nobody knew I was in care, but it was just like for other reasons. So, I feel like secondary school partially contributed to some of my issues. (Mila, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

Being in residential care also meant that the young person needed to abide by the rules established by the institution. While it was possible to have friends visiting, living in a different setting and following a set of rules may leave a young person feeling embarrassed.

> *Yeah, I was allowed to bring people over, but **how do you explain it to that person**? They might know about care, but they're coming into this kind of house and they're like: 'Oh, so you live here and you have to follow all these kind of weird rules and stuff', and that in that sense **I did find it a bit embarrassing**, like trying to explain home situations to people. (Hazel, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

A few young people had negative experiences at school due to their care background. Information that should have been private was shared by some students, who knew about the young person's care background.

> *I had actually a lot of [relatives] going to the school and they basically made my life torture, and they told everyone what was going on and things that I would never have said to anyone … it was like **everyone knew my personal business and I hadn't told them**. So that was really bad. (Ava, FG1, in third-level education (college))*

In another case, the young person was made to share his care status with the rest of the school community, which resulted in him being bullied by other children. This experience made Levi very reluctant about disclosing his care status again.

> *… This person was putting a lot of pressure on me to share my care status with the school community … Do you know what it did? I faced bullying within my primary school, **so I kind of had that in the back of my mind and I just didn't want that getting out** [when moving to a new school]. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

Ezra had difficulties in connecting with peers and making friends at the start of primary school, which had a negative impact on his confidence. The situation deteriorated later on with him being bullied until he finished his primary school.

> *You know, I've tried to make a bond, but most of the time that was, you know, just to no avail. I know I wouldn't make friends out of it. I wouldn't be invited places … And then when fifth class hit, I was the new kid. I got bullied. And then for pretty much the whole time from fifth class to when I finished school, I was targeted. I was bullied and I was made fun of. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))*

For Ezra, things were made worse by the fact that he was not 'up to date' with technology or social media and found it difficult to contribute to conversations with peers.

> *I really struggled to know what to talk about. I was never up to date with anything online and another thing – technology killed me … I would be behind on trends. **I'd be behind on this, that and the other**. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))*

Background-based bullying was also experienced by May (FG3, in third-level education (college)) after details about her circumstances were discovered by

another student and made public. In other cases, bullying was not related to the young person's care background, but other factors. Lily (FG3, in third-level education (college)), a victim of bullying, noted that while there was a lot of bullying happening at the school she attended, nothing was done about it.

4.6   SUPPORT IN THE SOCIAL SPHERE

Having a designated support system in place at school level was seen to offer support for a young person new to the school. Having left school for a while, on her return, Camila was paired up with another student who helped her to settle in again. The buddy system was in place for different groups of students: first- and second-year students as well as transfer students. In this instance, the buddy student also had care experience and could relate to the concerns that Camila had.

> And I found that extremely helpful when I came back to my old school, because obviously I'd left for a few months and things were different from like, you know, when I left and I came back and I didn't kind of really know where to start myself. I didn't really know what to do **and I was set up with the buddy and they were extremely lovely catching me up on**, you know, all the things that are different or new or the same in the school. (Camila, FG1, in third-level education (PLC))

A similar system was in place in the school that Eliana attended. However, the buddy system was only available for first-year students, who were paired up with their sixth-year counterparts. In other cases, such support systems were not available, and young people felt that they were 'thrown into the deep end'.

> Not in any of my schools anyway that I went to. There was none of that. You were kinda just like **thrown in there and hope for the best**. I mean, I think that [buddy system] would be a great idea or even like, you know, encouraging the new person to, like, take part in some sort of sport or some after-school group or something like that to get to know everybody else. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))

The importance of extracurricular activities in making friends was also highlighted by Theodore, Ava and Eliana, who felt that such activities can help young people to adjust to the new school environment. However, participation in such activities depends on what is provided by the school or available in the area. While some students could avail of various activities in their locality, in other cases the options were limited, especially in more remote rural areas.

> Yeah, there was a lot … we had like debating, we had music, we had basketball. **There was a lot to do** to make different types of friends. (Eliana, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))

> I think extracurricular activities at school or externally would really be beneficial. And the extracurricular activities, table tennis or football, **definitely would have helped if that had been available**, if I had done

that basically in primary school. That would be my take on that. (Theodore, FG1, in third-level education (university))

*I think it's kind of important that when you're moving placements especially **that you do keep on your extracurriculars** because I wasn't able to keep up with my extracurricular activities because they were not available in the area. It wasn't a case that we didn't try. It was literally that I was gonna have to drive like 45 minutes or something like that because it was in a very rural area. So that's kind of hard as well. (Ava, FG1, in third-level education (college))*

4.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated that care-experienced young people want to be treated as 'normal students' and not be 'singled out'. Many wish to separate their care experience from their school lives. However, their personal challenges often mean that they require additional support from staff at school. Teachers can have a transformative role in the lives of students. Their support is particularly important for care-experienced young people who often have disrupted lives in terms of care placements and change of schools. Students may find it easier to ask for support if a teacher shows genuine interest in their lives. At times, a close and trusting relationship with a teacher or another staff member can make a difference in whether a student becomes an early school leaver or not. Such student–teacher bonds can sometimes last beyond the end of the second-level school. While support from individual teachers is important, participation in programmes that address early school leaving add another scaffolding around the student. On the other hand, negative student–teacher interaction, insensitivity, stereotypical views on care-experienced children and youth and lost trust can adversely impact a student. Initial teacher education and continuous professional development should provide teachers with necessary tools for supporting care-experienced students in an appropriate and sensitive way. Better understanding is needed about challenges faced by these students, many of whom may have had experienced trauma, which in turn, has impacted their school attendance and engagement.

While teachers play an important role in the school experiences of young people, the support of foster parents and care professionals cannot be underestimated. Both are instrumental in ensuring consistency and routine in education. However, inadequate care by foster families and social workers, often due to limited resources, breakdown of care placements and turnover of social workers can have an adverse impact on the outcomes of care-experienced young people.

The experiences of young people are also impacted by their relationships with peers. For some, several school changes result in disrupted friendships and difficulties in connecting with new people. In some cases, difficulties in the social sphere can last throughout their school career. The situation can be more difficult if a young person becomes a victim of bullying.

In order to support social integration of students, schools can put in place specific support structures such as a buddy system and encourage care-experienced young people to participate in extracurricular activities with other students, thus creating common experiences that are useful in building new friendships. The experiences of the two groups of students – 'in third-level education' and 'interrupted third-level education' did not vary much. Both groups had both positive and negative experiences with their teachers, social workers and peers.

CHAPTER 5

Academic experiences at school

5.1   INTRODUCTION

International research has shown that care-experienced children and young people often experience various disruptions and high mobility regarding care and school placements as well as adversity and trauma, which tend to adversely affect their school engagement, attendance and educational outcomes (Brownell et al., 2015; Herbers et al., 2013). Attitudes and expectations of teachers and caregivers also play a role in how these young people fare in the education system (Mannay et al., 2017a, 2017b). Similar issues are found in the Irish context (Darmody et al., 2013; McElvaney et al., 2013).

This chapter considers the academic domain in the lives of care-experienced young people, with a focus on primary and second-level schools. The chapter starts with discussing young people's attitudes towards school and school attendance. Section 5.3 focuses on expectations, programmes and academic outcomes, then moving on to identifying sources of additional help with learning in Section 5.4. The discussion then moves on to outcomes of state exams and related challenges in Section 5.5. Section 5.6 provides concluding comments on issues addressed in the chapter.

5.2   ATTITUDES TOWARDS SCHOOL AND ATTENDANCE

Interviews with the care-experienced young people showed that their attitude towards school varied. While most felt positive about school, for others, their attitude was shaped by several intertwined factors. For Ezra, not having sufficient support regarding study and mental health as well as the number of times he had to move, resulted in him being very unmotivated to engage with schoolwork. 'You know, I felt very unmotivated for anything at school.' (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))

Sofia, who had learning difficulties, found school difficult. While she was good at some subjects, she really struggled with others.

> No, **I hated school**. I kind of classed it as a prison sentence to be honest. I really just did not like it. I suppose certain things I wanted to learn, like I loved art. Maths was an absolute nightmare. I still struggle with numbers. And Irish wasn't that great. I was good enough at French, but I think in school we were made learn a lot of things that we just didn't really need to know, because I know I learned a few things that I don't use today and in work, and that was the hardest part. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))

While some young people experienced challenges in an academic sphere, they

enjoyed being involved in social activities at school. For example, Eliana, who had learning difficulties, found learning hard but liked meeting new people and taking part in after-school activities. Not being good at learning had an adverse effect on Eliana's self-esteem.

> Yeah, **I didn't like the academic side of it**, but I did enjoy the social activities. So, I would do like debating after school. **I find learning a bit challenging** … And I did enjoy like, you know, meeting people, talking to people. And there's like a science programme after school, which I absolutely loved … but then the learning … I just wasn't big on it … I think that I went to a school where all the girls were like really smart and that **pressure of not being good enough**. I just [thought] – you guys can be the smart ones. I'll just sit back and watch. (Eliana, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))

Some young people in this study had issues with school attendance. Discussion with them indicated that poor attendance can relate to a number of factors in young people's lives. For Ava, attendance was impacted by her health issues. However, she tried to overcome her difficulties and stay on at school.

> I was in for something like 25 days of my Leaving Certificate, so that wasn't ideal. I have ADHD, so it's just like **I was trying to keep myself focused**. It was just so difficult and to be honest, there were points where I was just like, what is the point of doing this? (Ava, FG1, in third-level education (college))

Camila had had a number of care placements, which interrupted her attendance. Constantly moving from one school to another left her feeling frustrated and unmotivated. Camila also felt as if she had lost control over her life, as all the decisions were made about her without her input.

> **I had a really big issue attending school**. Honestly, it wasn't my fault because it got to a point where, like I was moving placements so much that … as soon as I settled, and then I started going back to school, I'd have to move again. And I got really frustrated at one point, because I thought like, **I wasn't being kept in the loop of what decisions were being made about my own life**. (Camila, FG1, in third-level education (PLC))

Camila felt that for care-experienced young people, school can be one constant thing in their lives and once settled in, moving to a new setting can be unsettling and disorienting.

> … For a really long time, no matter where I moved, I always stressed that I wanted to stay in the same school no matter how far the placement was … because like **consistency was really important to me**. You don't get consistency in care, so school was the only consistent thing for me since being in care, so I really didn't want to move. (Camila, FG1, in third-level education (PLC))

Another young person felt that while school attendance may be poor for some care-experienced young people due to trauma or other issues, this does not necessarily reflect their overall attitude towards education or their dedication to their studies.

> *… When you have young people who are care-experienced and they're experiencing trauma, maybe their **level of attendance at school is very poor, but that doesn't reflect their dedication at all to education**. I don't think anybody isn't interested in education. Everybody is interested in education. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

While some interviewees had experienced issues with attendance, which often was beyond their control, in the case of May and Levi, their school experience was impacted by being placed in a separate class.

> *So, I was in and out the whole time and when I did go, I used to get put into a class where **I wasn't allowed in with the other students** because they were there full time. So, I was like held back quite a lot. (May, FG3, in third-level education (college))*

> *So, I would be concerned that maybe some teachers may **put care-experienced students into that group of students that … aren't interested in education**. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

5.3 EXPECTATIONS, PROGRAMMES AND ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

5.3.1 Expectations

The interviewees felt that adults in their lives sometimes had low expectations of them, particularly regarding academic achievement and outcomes. However, some interviewees argued that rather than having limited interest in education, care-experienced young people may not always get the help and assistance they need.

> *Kids are not expected to, I guess, enjoy or engage in education. But I think for the most part, it's because **they don't get the actual assistance that they need** in regard to the education. (Camila, FG1, in third-level education (PLC))*

Going into care can have an adverse effect on a young person who may have been very studious before, but who subsequently encountered various challenges, including stereotypical negative attitudes towards care-experienced young people. Luna noted that the first hurdle was getting a place in a school. Timing of the school transfer also meant that she had missed several months of going to school. Luna felt that the school staff were initially apprehensive about her, but the situation changed once they were presented with her previous grades and project work.

*I was, yeah, really studious. But then I was in care for four months before I was able to go to school … But it was at least one month before the social workers were trying to get me into school, and the **school just would not give them an appointment** … I think from the way the interactions went during the meeting and also how long it took them beforehand, it seemed to me that **they had a stereotype of what a child in care would be like** … Is it that they did not want to deal with a foster child because they had a prejudice or an idea of what that would mean? And then when they actually met me and saw me pulling out all my grades and projects I was doing on the side, they were really happy to have me then and very eager. I was wondering then, why would it take so long? (Luna, FG1, in third-level education (university))*

This was not an isolated case. Luna had witnessed young people also going through the same process whereby they had to wait a considerable amount of time before they secured a place in the school.

*And I saw it then play out with some other kids that were in the same household in another placement and going into primary school, that **they were waiting for ages as well**. And because I was friends with someone whose parent was on the Board of Management of the school, I saw it first-hand that they **didn't want to deal with foster children**, because of what they expect … the additional needs. So therefore, they try and delay it. I don't really … understand the reason why, unless it's that they genuinely do need extra supports and they're trying to get those in place before they go to school. But I still also think education is a right. You know, sometimes teachers may be a little bit uncomfortable with maybe a rowdy student, but they can't block their access to education because of it. I don't think it's fair. (Luna, FG1, in third-level education (university))*

5.3.2   Programmes

The majority of young people in this study followed the traditional Leaving Certificate (LC) programme. Only a few interviewees had followed the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)[21]. Regarding the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA),[22] in some cases teachers in the school the young people attended had advised them to take this option, instead of the regular Leaving Certificate, thinking that this programme would be more suitable to them.

*My teacher said, 'I think you should do LCA because I think **you're really gonna struggle**,' and I turned around and said, 'Look, listen, I'm going to do my Leaving Cert and that's that.' (Sofia, FG5, interrupted*

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[21] The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is a two-year Leaving Certificate programme with a focus on self-directed learning, enterprise and preparation for working life.
[22] The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is a two-year Leaving Certificate programme with a focus on adult and working life. The course is organised into four half-year blocks or sessions and students are assessed in each session.

third-level education (college))

When asked why she had not considered taking the LCA, Sofia noted that she felt that she was able to sit for the regular Leaving Certificate. She also wanted to do the course that everybody else was doing.

> *I suppose **I felt able to do my Leaving Cert**. I wanted to do the same thing, more or less, as everybody else, and **I didn't want to go into LCA because of somebody else having an opinion** that I wouldn't be able for it when I felt I was. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

Resistance to opting for LCA was also associated with not wanting to be different from students taking the regular Leaving Certificate course. Eliana indicated that the LCA programme was not thought of as highly as the regular Leaving Certificate.

> *The school I went to, **LCA was kind of labelled like 'slow'** or you weren't good enough to do the normal [Leaving Certificate]. And even how it is very segregated, how they would assign you to the Applied. Even when the principal [was giving a talk about LC], it was [evident that there was a divide between LC and LCA] – **like you were different people – you weren't the same.** (Eliana, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

Eliana observed that negative perception was also associated with the Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) programme.

> *I think [it's] the same thing with LCA. [PLC] was seen as degrading, like why would you go there? **You're kind of stupid if you do that.** (Eliana, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

5.3.3   Academic outcomes

Much of international and Irish research has shown that care-experienced students tend to have lower academic outcomes. Many care-experienced young people in this study had strived to do well at school.

> *For me, when I was at home, I was pulled out of school almost as like a punishment. **I was really, really eager to go to school.** I was very academic. I did ten subjects for my Leaving Certificate, and I was, yeah, really studious. (Luna, FG1, in third-level education (university))*

Not surprisingly, care experience – particularly regarding undergoing multiple care placements – had an impact on the learning experience of the interviewees.

> *I wasn't like, incredibly happy, with my Leaving Cert results. Sometimes I could get a bit tired. When I was in foster care … and was switched to different foster homes – five in the [space of] 18 months … like **that really did impact my grades and everything**. (Mila, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

Another young person had started off secondary school with good grades, but a

change in care placement, as well as the pressure of the exams, had an adverse effect on his learning.

> I was … struggling through the whole end of secondary school and I was very lost coming out of it. In second year, I was still doing very well. Towards the end of the year, I won two awards for maths and English. **I was at the top of my game educationally** … Once I started heading in towards the third year, between the move and the stress of the exams, everything started caving in. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))

For this young person, participating in Transition Year during the COVID-19 pandemic, with less focus on learning, meant a loss of motivation.

> I moved and as you know, COVID came along somewhere down the line. So, fourth year, Transition Year, we didn't really do much at all. It was kind of a blank year. So, for that year, there weren't a lot of assignments. There wasn't a lot of work. And I think that almost allowed me to just crash. I wasn't motivated. **There wasn't a lot to do, so I just kind of let myself fall back**. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))

Gradual decline in academic achievement also applied to Sofia, who had performed well at the beginning of secondary school and got a lot of support from her foster family regarding her education. However, being moved in her final year at school affected her grades and motivation.

> Academically, I had done quite [well] for my Junior Cert … it was a family I was with … I had a set routine to study and everything. As of my last two years, I would have gone really downhill with the Leaving Cert and everything. I kind of **lost a lot of interest in education because I had been moved again in my Leaving Certificate year**, so I didn't really see the point in doing my education. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))

The opposite was true for Eliana, who initially struggled at school due to her learning difficulties, but ended up doing better, when appropriate help was put into place.

> From first year to third year, I kind of struggled **because I have dyslexia and there wasn't that much support**. My foster parents had to really push to get supports in place for me. But then **once I got into fourth and sixth year, I did pretty well**. I did everything higher level, got 420 points in my Leaving Cert, so that was pretty a good year, I think. (Eliana, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))

Multiple challenges that some care-experienced children face can be best illustrated by May's experience. A combination of care placement and school changes, bullying and mental health issues resulted in the young person dropping out of school for a while. However, with help from teachers, she was eventually

able to re-engage and finish school.

> *And then when I moved into my foster home, I went into a different school … I went into sixth class there. So automatically **I was behind to their teaching**. Even in the classroom, like everyone noticed that the teacher would have to sit beside me the whole time and give me a lot of attention … I was getting bullied the whole time … towards fifth year. At this point, I dropped out completely. I went back to fifth year, and I was like, I'm just gonna stay the two years, get through, and I did that with the help of **a few teachers and the school. That gave me a lot of time to catch up on everything**. So, I was lucky in that aspect that **they actually gave me the time to go back in. Change my failure.** (May, FG3, in third-level education (college))*

Lily decided not to sit for the Leaving Certificate as she struggled with some subjects and dropped out of school. However, she continued her education elsewhere and enjoyed a more flexible approach to learning.

> *The **school was not for me** in the sense that you're graded on subjects that you're not … If you're not good at it, you're still graded and then it's taken into account … And then when it came to dropping out, when fourth year I got asked to go back – 'Would you like to go back to school?' And I said no, I was like, I'd rather go and try study outside of school, and that's what I did. And you know what? I found it more lively, more interesting and more inclusive … **there were no sad faces because somebody didn't get something right**. If you had a problem, you were able to go up to the teacher and tell that problem to that teacher, and that teacher would go one-to-one with you, until you understood it. Like, that's what I loved about it. (Lily, FG3, in third-level education (college))*

Taking fewer subjects was also a preferred option for Camila, who struggled at school due to health and other issues. For her, a PLC course was seen as more suitable.

> *So, I originally started off doing Leaving Cert, but I never actually finished it. I dropped out in fifth year. I was still in touch with my career guidance counsellor from the school, and we were just looking at ways to get me back into education because it was extremely [difficult] at the time. I was going through an ADHD assessment, so it was extremely difficult to manage home life and school life at the same time. So, I ended up doing PLC for a year and I found that extremely helpful because **I was actually doing something that I had interest in, not doing eight or nine subjects** when I only had an interest in one or two. (Camila, FG1, in third-level education (PLC))*

Inflexibility of the education system regarding the needs of different types of learners was also highlighted by the stakeholder consultation group. It was acknowledged that once a young person has missed school, it is very difficult to

catch up due to the inflexibility of the system. Even when different learning options are available, this can be problematic for some students.

> *I think the word that's coming to mind for me is the systems. That **the systems are not responsive to the needs of the young people**. You know, the Leaving Cert syllabus, the way that schools are set up, it can be very inflexible. So, if you're moving from one school to another and you're missing school and have gaps in your education, there's no way of like, making that up. You know, it's very hit and miss, I suppose. You can be lucky and maybe that chapter's being covered or revised again in a few weeks, or maybe not. I think with things like maths and science where you're building kind of blocks in education – this piece informs this piece. **It can be really, really difficult to play catch-up** when you've, you know, been in different settings or had gaps. So, I think the education system itself is very inflexible. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

> *It is something that's there; there's a project, I believe, being done by TESS [Tusla Education Support Service] at the moment that there's an iScoil,[23] but it's not the traditional Leaving Certificate. It's QQI [Quality and Qualifications Ireland][24] modules that you can do. I believe it's only up to level three. So Junior Cert level. But again, you need supports with a young person to be able to help them navigate that, get them, you know, logged in, et cetera. But **those two systems then don't meet**; you know, you can't do the Junior Cert and do the QQI. There's no integration we'll say. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

5.3.4   Additional help with learning

The interviewees were asked whether they had received any additional help in school. Overall, the care-experienced young people said that help was available when they needed it.

> *All the help they gave me … **as much help as I needed**, and I even asked for more on top of this … I had grinds for nearly every subject in my Leaving Cert … And my free classes, I made sure that I found a teacher who was free that could help me to learn a bit more … So, **I had enough support**. I suppose my attitude always was like, if you don't ask for help, then nothing's gonna change. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

> *I took my Junior Cert, and those **teachers that did know what was going on did help me** and did at least give some advice into, you know, just the easier part of the exam to complete so that I could fulfil my*

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[23] iScoil is a non-profit online learning service that offers young people a pathway to learning, accreditation and progression.
[24] Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is the state agency responsible for providing information on the qualifications included on the National Framework of Qualifications.

points … And that did help me do at least relatively well in my Junior Cert. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))

Lily felt that she had benefitted the most from one-to-one help, although this was provided for a very limited period of time.

*Like one-to-one [help], **when I did request it, it was very brief**. I think if I had more one-to-one with them, I would have continued with chemistry and biology … but with the Irish as well. (Lily, FG3, in third-level education (college))*

When asked about getting help from other students, the interviewees felt that they did not want the other students to know that they were struggling.

*No, I kept to myself. **I wouldn't go near anyone to ask for help** … because you wouldn't want anyone knowing that you're struggling. (May, FG3, in third-level education (college))*

May's response may reflect a general attitude of teenagers who, being self-conscious, prefer not to let other students know that they may be struggling. However, the situation may be more acute for care-experienced young people who may not wish to draw attention to themselves.

Another young person was less concerned about the reaction of other students, noting that the care experience had taught her to look after herself. However, she also noted that not enough help was offered.

*For me, it was not being afraid to ask somebody for help because of their reaction … we were always like fight or flight, you know? **We're always kind of looking out for ourselves**, especially from day one. We always had to do our own things, so **asking somebody for help, it feels weird, it feels odd.** You're not used to it, because you've never been actually offered help before. Like there was no help actually offered, there could have been help offered. (Lily, FG3, in third-level education (college))*

In addition to help available at school, in many cases the foster parents were also a good source of additional support.

*It was very, very important, and **I was kind of made to work**, like I had no choice but to do it. Which was good, you know, I'm happy about that. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

*I had a good relationship with my foster parents … **they were pushing me to do well at school**, (Willow, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

5.3.5   Outcomes of state exams

Young people in the study had varying degrees of success in their state exams. While most had successfully sat their Leaving Certificate exams, some had only managed to sit for their Junior Certificate exams.

> *[I did] **mostly higher-level subjects for my Leaving Certificate**, but … I took two ordinary maybe, feeling I could do well. (Theodore, FG1, in third-level education (university))*

> ***I never did my Leaving Cert.** I did my Junior Certificate, then I did fourth year, my Transition Year. It was compulsory in my school, so there was no skipping it. So, fourth year was a bit of messing around and then after that I went [to an education centre] (Lily, FG3, in third-level education (college))*

Life circumstances of another young person meant that even though she performed well in the Junior Certificate, she had decided not to sit for the Leaving Certificate, much to the disappointment of the teachers in the school.

> *Yeah, I feel like I did really well in my Junior Cert. **The grades that I got were really good** as well. Like I remember when I did kinda bring up at the meeting with the school and my social worker to say that I was dropping out of school, like everyone was extremely upset and disappointed … they had this expectation, and they were like, you know, you were one of our high hopes. (Camila, FG1, in third-level education (PLC))*

Young people in this study who took the Leaving Certificate exam felt the stress and anxiety associated with it. In one case, this was compounded by the approach adopted by the school in highlighting the importance of the exam in future life chances of young people. Eliana felt that the pressure from the school to do well in the exams may have been counterproductive as it increased the anxiety levels in students and may have had an adverse effect on their exam performance.

> *We had an assembly every Monday with our principal who would give us this lecture on how important Leaving Cert is. Just **how like brutal those conversations were** … I think at one point it felt just very degrading. It's like if you don't work hard, you could end up in a low-grade job having a worse life. All of this, every single Monday, the same conversation. So, we kind of knew [the Leaving Cert] was important. I think [the talk] **made a lot of girls very nervous**. I know three girls had an anxiety attack coming out of classes and that's not OK, you know? **Mental health wise, I think it really destroyed a lot of the girls** who would have gotten to do something greater but that kind of 'I'm not good enough' [thinking] stopped them from getting better results in their exams. (Eliana, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

Sofia knew that she was going to take a PLC course and was not concerned about the points in the Leaving Certificate exam.

> *I'll be honest, like **I just passed my Leaving Cert** and I'm happy that I passed. I wasn't actually looking for points at all. I didn't have an aim because if I did, **I just would have stressed myself out too much**, so I*

> *was … Great, I'm gonna pass it and all I had to do was pass, to get into my course. I was gonna do a PLC and yeah, I didn't really have to worry about point systems or anything like that. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

However, this young person did not do that well on the course, because of her personal issues that affected her progression on the course.

> *The PLC was really good. Unfortunately, I didn't actually do quite well in this because of **my own issues, personal issues and that affected my results.** What I had done was really, really good. Like I got some fantastic experience out of it and it's probably something that I may go back into further down the line. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

At the time of COVID-19, students preparing to leave secondary school had the option of a calculated grade or a written exam. The option of calculated grade was available in all subjects. Isabella felt that if they had sat for the Leaving Certificate exam, they might have done better.

> *It was the year 2020 when COVID hit. So that's when we got the predicted grades. So, we had done, you know, the mocks, I think in January … I can't even remember – and I was close to 400. So, I was happy with that. Like my course was only 300 points, so it didn't really matter as long as I got over 300. But when the predicted grades came out, I was actually quite disappointed, because one or two of the teachers put my max low, when my average was like a grade higher than that … It just **felt like the teachers undermined me**. (Isabella, FG1, in third-level education (college))*

Several young people noted that although they had endeavoured to do well in their Leaving Certificate exams, often what was going on in their lives at the time took precedence.

> *To be honest, **I just did not care. I had too much on**. I turned 18 in the July, so I had really too much on my plate. But like you finished your exams in June? I literally had a month to get my act together and kind of move and stuff for that, and that was really [tough]. (Ava, FG1, in third-level education (college))*

> *I did [consider Leaving Certificate results important] but considering what was going on around me at that time and you know, the pressure of turning 18 and whatnot, and the stress to deal with that and **your attention being divided**, you know, between studies and everything else going on … (Theodore, FG1, in third-level education (university))*

While the young people were trying to cope with the immediate challenges associated with gearing up to the exam and leaving care, later on some of them regretted that they did not do better in the exams. Not getting enough points meant that they had limited access to some courses and professions.

*I'm caring about it now because **I'm basically a lost student** and I'm applying for a lot of intern programmes and every single one of them asked for your points … I didn't realise this, but if you got below 500, it actually takes you off the application page. So, you can't apply any further. They don't want anyone below 500 points, so that was a bit of a shocker for me. I didn't realise this at all. I kind of have to reach out to the smaller firms and hope they reply, because **I actually can't apply to the bigger firms. It's not possible**. (Ava, FG1, in third-level education (college))*

Similar sentiment was expressed by Theodore, who felt that while he had a general idea of the importance of Leaving Certificate exams regarding entry into third-level education, his life situation and challenges were his immediate concern.

*I think **with what was going on, you have enough**. I started the aftercare process at 16 and I suppose you have care plans there and you're told about the aftercare allowance and the importance of going on to college. I suppose at the time I did know the importance of the Leaving Certificate for getting into college. Now, whether or not I cared, considering everything else that was going on at the time, my answer will be no. I didn't particularly care that much … **Had I been settled as such, if I had known then what I know now, it definitely would have changed things**. (Theodore, FG1, in third-level education (university))*

While Sofia did not think the results of the Leaving Certificate mattered to her personally, she acknowledged the importance of the results for entry into third-level education.

*I didn't really see the point of the whole thing. Yeah, to be honest, because what I'm doing now, like, they didn't even ask for my Leaving Cert. But yeah, I think, you know, it is somewhat important because **it's kind of one of those things in life where you just have to get this stage done**. And you know, we're in a country where Leaving Cert is necessary to get into third-level college or university. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

5.4   CONCLUSIONS

Existing research has highlighted the role of personal circumstances of care-experienced young people's lives that impact their educational outcomes. This chapter has considered factors that influence young people's attitudes to school and their experiences. The interviews conducted for this study showed that young people's attitudes to school are often influenced by changes in the care placements and school changes, learning difficulties, insufficient support with schoolwork, not feeling as smart as other students, and mental health issues. Some of these issues were also associated with poor school attendance. It is important to note

that poor school attendance and lower grades do not necessarily reflect lack of interest of a young person in education but is often influenced by circumstances beyond their control.

In line with international and Irish research, the interviews in this study showed that some adults in the lives of care-experienced students had low expectations of them. While young people can be very motivated, challenges associated with being in care often impacted their academic achievement. In some cases, lower expectations can be observed when teachers guide students toward specific second-level programmes, despite the resistance by the young person. Stereotypical negative attitudes about children in care can sometimes result in difficulties finding schools, due to care changes of the young person.

Having learning difficulties, insufficient help with learning and mental health issues shaped the attitude towards school for some people. Care placement changes may result in students missing school and finding it hard to catch up afterwards. Second-level school can be a particularly stressful time for young people due to the high-stakes Leaving Certificate exams. If this coincides with personal challenges at the time, and drawing up a care leaving plan, it can be a particularly difficult time for young people in care. Young people 'in third level' and 'interrupted third level' groups shared some similar experiences. In both groups, there were young people who endeavoured to do well at school. However, their aspirations were sometimes impacted by more immediate issues such as care and school placements, which also impacted on their school attendance. In both groups, there were young people whose foster parents supported their education. However, the 'interrupted third level' group had more people with learning difficulties and who experienced the stress associated with placement and school moves, and preparation for the state exams more acutely.

CHAPTER 6

Decision-making and advice about post-school pathways

6.1   INTRODUCTION

Educational attainment is a key indicator of post-school outcomes such as improved life chances and labour market success. Educational experiences and attainment are strongly influenced by the support and guidance available in the education systems and schools. Much of the existing research has focused on post-school pathways of young people in general, and their decision-making process and planning. This process is informed by a number of factors including the young person's personal background as well as support and guidance available to the young person. Earlier work from the ESRI has shown that aspirations to enter third-level education emerge as early as junior cycle (McCoy et al., 2014).

This chapter discusses the support received by care-experienced young people when they were still at school and identifies different sources of advice they received. The chapter starts with discussing young people's views about the importance of education. Section 6.3 focuses on decision-making and advice received regarding post-school pathways.

6.2   PLANNING FOR POST-SCHOOL PATHWAYS

Chapter 5 highlighted various challenges that care-experienced young people experience during their educational careers. While some did well at school, others struggled, mainly because of the frequent care placement changes and changing schools. However, the interviews with care-experienced young people showed that they understood the importance of education for further life chances in terms of entering the labour market, getting a stable income and being able to support one's family.

> *I think that most of us would understand **the value of education in getting you out of that adversity**. And that's how I always viewed education. That's where my dedication, commitment to education came from. I viewed **education as a lifeboat** to escape that kind of sinking ship is what I'd say. That education is very good in terms of getting a new job and stable income and being able to support a family and all of that stuff. And I would definitely say that **education is a priority for nearly everyone in care**. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

Despite understanding the importance of doing well in school, care-experienced young people face various challenges in engaging with schools, as many experience disrupted education, receive limited support in settling into new schools or experience mental health issues that make it more difficult for these young people

to fully engage with education, as discussed in earlier chapters of this report. However, persisting with learning is important for improving the situation for young people as they exit the care system and start independent life.

> *I think there are **certain barriers that prevent young people from engaging in education**, but I think regardless whether you're maybe in a residential centre and you have grown up in a residential centre all your life, or you have come into care later in your life, I think that **the emphasis on education is so important** because you see it as a way to get out of that adversity and more importantly, you want to have your own identity. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

Post-school planning can be a stressful time for all students, but even more so for care-experienced young people who are also approaching exit from the care system. There are distinct implications both for young people who have identified a preferred occupation and those who remain undecided about them and the consequences for post-school pathways. The advice and support from families, teachers and carers are salient in this decision-making process. Care-experienced young people are likely to find the process more challenging because for many, their educational careers have been disrupted by several care placement changes and changing schools.

6.2.1 Teachers and other staff members

For most young people, their teachers provided help and advice in how to organise their studies and do well in the exams to acquire a sufficient number of points to ensure they had more options available to them when finishing school.

> *I took my Junior Cert and those **teachers that did know what was going on did help me and did at least give some advice** … so that I could fulfil my points. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))*

> *I had a really good **teacher who used to talk to me about twice a day** and we were just looking at stuff to do in college and stuff like that. And she always pushed me to [pursue a profession] – **she told me that I could do it.** (Willow, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

> *I found **a lot of people influential, especially some of my teachers** … they were very, very inspirational. (Lily, FG3, in third-level education (college))*

However, some interviewees noted that if they did not get along with a certain teacher, this had an impact on developing aspirations for future and their learning. Input from some teachers also shaped their understanding of what post-school education may be like.

> *You really have to look at who's supporting you, but I also think **you need to look at who doesn't inspire you** and what impact they have on you. So, for example, you know you may have a teacher that you*

*don't get along with; I think for younger people, I would hope that that is all changing now, because you have younger teachers coming in and there's a higher level of education and social awareness. I felt that some people, and it may not have been their intention to do so, **discouraged my advancement in education**, if that makes sense. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

*I think it's the **people who actually showed up for you** … Those are the people you remember. But then there's also **people you remember who weren't very helpful**. (Hazel, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

*I remember my [subject] teacher in particular was saying that once you go to college, the lecturers don't care about you, like you know, **you're really just a number**, hence why I picked like the institutes instead of the actual universities. (Isabella, FG1, in third-level education (college))*

In order to assist students in their post-school decision-making, school-based guidance counsellors advise young people about different options available to them. Young people in this study had varied views about the support they received from their guidance counsellors. Some of the interviewees had positive experiences and discussed the additional support received by them. For May, additional support from her guidance counsellor meant that she received encouragement in continuing her education even when she had a short spell of not being at school.

*When I was in hospital at the time and [the career guidance teacher] came in to actually visit me, I remember her saying: you're going to get out with this […] she was sitting there, trying to get me through. And **she was just like, you can do this. You can go on further**. And then when I got out of hospital and went into the school a few months later, she brought me in every Thursday or Friday for a meet for an hour and go through all the colleges and stuff with me to make sure I'd get in; and she did the DARE programmes and stuff with me. So, I was lucky she was there. (May, FG3, in third-level education (college))*

On the other hand, some young people felt that they did not get sufficient advice and support from their guidance counsellor. For example, Eliana felt that she was discouraged by her guidance counsellor in pursuing a specific course and subsequent profession.

*I had a guidance counsellor **who was just very negative**. Like if you wanted to do something that was not popular, she would immediately shut it down, like: 'Maybe not, that probably won't work with you' … I think a lot of girls in that year also experienced that and ended up, you know, **turning away from the person that was supposed to help us**. (Eliana, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

Unwillingness of guidance counsellors to consider options preferred by a young person can have a negative impact on self-confidence on all young people, but can have a disproportionate effect for care-experienced young people who may rely more on the advice and support from guidance counsellors considering their lack of family support.

In one case, insufficient advice resulted in opting for a course without realising what this would mean for getting a job after finishing the course. It was partially due to the fact that this young person seemed to be uncertain as to what they wanted to do in future.

> I **didn't get support** in actually figuring out what I wanted to do. So, I ended up doing a whole bachelor's degree [in a subject] … And then I **didn't really have anybody to talk to** about it, or have any input in what that would actually mean for careers. I didn't think about what job I would get out of [a subject] degree. So yeah, I think all students should be able to have that kind of support. Even if it seems that they're decided … I specifically didn't get [advice] because **they said, oh, you have got your head screwed on**. So, you're not going to do the aptitude testing. I think it could have been helpful. (Luna, FG1, in third-level education (university))

As discussed in previous chapters in this report, many care-experienced young people have to deal with multiple challenges during the time of deciding what to do after leaving school. Some of the interviews indicated that guidance counsellors were not always aware of a young person's life challenges or mental health issues and that the advice given is often steeped in a 'standard' practice that students follow. Camila felt that her personal circumstances made it very difficult to focus on post-school decision-making. The situation became more stressful by a constant push from the guidance counsellor to sit for the Leaving Certificate exam. Camila felt that it would have been helpful if the guidance counsellor had a better understanding of her situation and suggested alternative ways in how to achieve her goal.

> I had quite a few conversations with my guidance counsellor about what I wanted to do … I guess it would have helped a lot if the people who were advising me or my career **were a little bit more open to what I needed**, instead of what was the standard or the norm. You know, believing in the norm: you do your Leaving Cert, and you go to college. Basically, your points. But there's no real actual routes for people who can't do the normal Leaving Cert or can't do the normal school life to, you know, achieve their dreams or develop their career. So, I definitely **wished that the people advising me would have been a lot more informed. It was me who found the route into becoming** a [profession] without the Leaving Cert, and it was extremely difficult to find. So, I guess I didn't feel supported. I felt like **if I wasn't doing what was expected of me that things wouldn't really work out**.

(Camila, FG1, in third-level education (PLC))

Ezra noted that it is a good idea to pick a course that one can get a good career out of. He felt that at the time when he was considering his post-school options, such options were limited: 'I didn't have that much to look at, I suppose'. With little advice received from the guidance counsellor, this young person was undecided about what course to opt for. Furthermore, his personal circumstances made it difficult for him to fully focus on post-school education. This young person benefitted from having some time after secondary school to fully understand what course he wanted pursue in future.

> *It was **difficult for me when I was coming out of secondary** school to put my head down and, you know, do the research or do the study or whatever. And it got very confusing. It was very difficult to deal with, and I ended up coming out of college and starting work. But now since I've had a bit of time, I'm looking at college options, something that I can really go for. I'm ready to be able to put my head down, to study everything that needs to be studied. Do the assignments the way they need to be done without the distractions or **confusion of not knowing what I wanted to do while doing a course**. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))*

Despite the input from guidance counsellors, which varied, many people in this study felt that they were undecided about what course to pursue after finishing school. Subsequently, the young people put down a number of different options on their application form. Theodore noted that he was still uncertain about the career he wanted to pursue even after pursuing an undergraduate degree in a certain field, and wished that he had received more advice while still at school.

> *I suppose when I was choosing mine, it was more a case of putting down as many things as you have a remote interest in as possible. And you're waiting for your points and kind of hoping something sticks. I did the bachelor's [in a certain field] and by the end of that, I was still like, do I wanna do this? You know what I mean? I had a remote interest in the area, but then I went on to do a course [in a different field] … and now I'm in a master's [in yet another area], so **if I had got support around the time**, I probably wouldn't have had to go through five or six years of education to get where I am now. I don't regret it. However, it would have probably streamlined things a lot more if I had got a lot more support when I was at that age. I just simply didn't get it. (Theodore, FG1, in third-level education (university))*

One person felt that in a way, care-experienced young people can have similar experiences as other young people, as there are always some teachers or other staff who may not be that encouraging. And this is not necessarily associated to being in care but with other factors. 'You always have those teachers or guidance counsellors who are kind of discouraging, like they might tell you: no, realistically,

you're not gonna get this choice that you want.' (Mila, FG2, in third-level education (college))

6.2.2 Support from social workers

International research has highlighted the importance of care and social workers in supporting the educational careers of care-experienced children and young people (Crawford et al., 2011). Young people in this study had varied experiences with their social workers. In some cases, social workers were very supportive of the options young people wanted to pursue, giving them a sense that they are being listened to. For example, when Levi was considering continuing his education abroad, his social worker was very encouraging and supported his ideas.

> *So, coming up to 18, I was lucky enough to have a very good social worker. She was in my corner, and she was a huge support to me. And* ***she was very encouraging of my education****. So, for example, what I was looking at then, around 17, was studying abroad in Europe, because some of their degrees are done in English, they're fully funded, et cetera. Thankfully my social worker was very supportive. Now, I chose to stay on in Ireland, but she was* ***very supportive*** *of exploring that with me, so at least I had that as a backup option. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

However, Ezra felt that the support he received from his social worker regarding his education was minimal. 'I wasn't getting a lot of visits from my social worker.' (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))

6.2.3 Support from foster parents and care staff

Previous studies have shown that support from foster parents has a positive impact on the educational careers and decision-making of young people. In the same vein, the interviews conducted for this study showed that in some cases, it was the foster family who was instrumental in supporting the young person in the decision-making process.

> *[My guidance counsellor] wasn't much help, and I suppose* ***my foster mum****, like she was quite good.* ***She'd sit down with me and talk to me about different colleges and stuff like that****. Like you know, we thought it was better that I didn't go to any big universities because they have big lecture rooms … So, we decided that I'd go to a smaller [one]. So, my mum and myself decided what I was going to do. (Isabella, FG1, in third-level education (college))*

When Camila was trying to decide what to do after finishing school, she got a lot of support from the staff of her residential care home. The staff were aware of Camila's preferences and encouraged her to pursue her dream. They also helped Camila in understanding whether her dream was realistic and achievable.

> *For me, it was* ***staff in my residential*** *[setting] that were really helpful because obviously they spent every day with me. So, they knew me*

*more than anyone. So, when I came back home and I was like, 'What career should I go for, things I should do, like health care, should I do something in business?' Like they knew that I always had a passion for being in the [specific field], so **they were extremely helpful and supporting the career that I wanted to go for** and, you know, making sure that it was really what I wanted and what would suit me going forward. (Camila, FG1, in third-level education (PLC))*

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that young people wanted to be heard and have their ideas considered by the significant adults in their lives. Hazel felt that 'I think people should listen more to what the young person is saying. Rather than what they think is best, because this is happening to you, and if you're saying this, then you know yourself best.' (Hazel, FG2, in third-level education (college))

6.3   CONCLUSION

For many young people, educational attainment offers them an opportunity to improve their situation and have better life chances. For care-experienced young people, continuing their studies and getting a good job enables them to exit the adversity in their lives. However, despite understanding the importance of education, many encounter a range of obstacles along the way. Support and advice from various sources are important for a young person during the decision-making process. At this juncture in their lives, young people need to be assured that they can do well and achieve their goals. While teachers can be an important support for students, some, however, may not support the ambitions young people have. Furthermore, career guidance can be a very useful source of information for students. However, negative feedback from career guidance teachers may demotivate some young people in pursuing their preferred post-school option.

In addition to teachers and career counsellors, social workers and foster families are another potential source of support and advice for young people regarding their post-school options. However, as some young people have limited contact with their social worker, there is little additional advice that a young person can receive from them. The quality of support from foster families is also important – young people with supportive foster families who recognise the importance of education can get a lot of advice and support from them. In both 'in third-level education' and 'interrupted third-level education' groups, there were students who felt that they did not get sufficient support in the decision-making process. Foster parents and social workers were mentioned more often by the first group regarding supporting their decision-making process.

It is important to note that the challenges associated with the transition from secondary to tertiary are applicable to all young people. However, the intersection of that school experience with care experience can be more limiting for care-experienced children and young people unless required support is put in place.

CHAPTER 7

Transition from care to aftercare and third-level education

7.1   INTRODUCTION

Throughout their educational career, children and young people experience a number of transitions: moving to primary school, moving from primary to secondary school and then to third-level education or training or, to the labour market. How well children and young people adjust to the demands of each following phase has an impact on their outcomes, as the dispositions towards learning and academic achievement are shaped by students' experiences at school early on (Bakketeig and Backe-Hansen, 2018). Most young people undergo these changes with a minimum disruption, while others may encounter considerable challenges.

As discussed in the previous chapters, care-experienced children and young people experience additional transitions throughout their lives as some have had multiple care placements and school changes. In some cases, these changes may also coincide with the major transition points in education, including entry into third-level education. Care leavers are an heterogenous group in terms of their individual challenges, with many needing additional support when entering third-level education (Bunn and Fuller, 2023). In particular, having consistent support from a designated contact person throughout their third-level course can be a deciding factor for young people staying on in post-school education (Rak and Fuller, 2017). However, putting in place targeted supports can be challenging, as many young people do not wish to be identified by their care status due to the stigma they have experienced in the past (Sebba and Luke, 2019).

This chapter explores the experiences of this group of young people as they prepare for and go through a post-school transition. Leaving school and selecting their post-school trajectory happens at the time when they are also preparing for the exit from the care system. This chapter begins with discussing challenges associated with moving into aftercare. Section 7.3 focuses on the transition to college/higher education, highlighting areas where students require additional support. Section 7.4 discusses the importance of support available for young care leavers who have entered third-level education, while Section 7.5 concludes the chapter.

7.2   TRANSITION INTO AFTERCARE

According to the national aftercare policy in Ireland, a core eligible age range for aftercare is from 18 years up to 21 years. Aftercare services can support care leavers until the age of 23 if they are in full-time education or training. An aftercare worker can assist a care leaver in a number of areas including reviewing the

aftercare plan if they have one, giving advice on entitlements, arranging referrals to other services if needed, helping a young person to complete application forms where needed, as well as providing supporting documentation for grants, housing, social welfare or other applications.[25] While a young person can be referred to aftercare from age 16, once they meet the eligibility criteria, this does not always mean they are allocated an aftercare worker[26]. The difficulties involved in moving out of foster or residential care can be daunting for some young people. The focus group discussions with care-experienced young people in this study showed that not all were satisfied with the level of support they received during the post-school transition. For example, Ezra felt that for him the transition was difficult, given the extent of the change.

> It is very difficult coming straight from foster care as a whole, from second-level education, with a family that you know you weren't born into … To have **to jump straight from second level to third level without any additional supports in between**. So that you can come to terms with leaving foster care and entering aftercare. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))

The interviewees noted that there is a need for young people to have access to supports to make the 'double transition' – moving out of care and secondary education to post-secondary education. Concern about the uncertain future ahead of them emerged from several interviews with the young people, mainly centring on not having the same family support structure that their peers do, in case something does not work out.

> I feel like once you get to … when you're near 18, **when you have family and stuff, you can fall back on if stuff goes wrong**. If college isn't working out or something like that. But once you're older and you're in aftercare, it's kind of … down to you. You've to make that decision, which is really hard because **I'd love to just be able to say, oh, I'm just gonna move back into my parents' house now because I can, but I can't, you know? That's difficult, that's hard. It's a difficult transition from secondary school to just being by yourself.** (Hazel, FG2, in third-level education (college))

Some young people in this study felt that aftercare support should be available earlier, considering the significant change in the lives of care-experienced young people as they move out of foster care or residential care. May had asked for an aftercare worker towards the end of her secondary school in order to get the support she needed.

> I think **they should start giving the aftercare worker like bang on at 16 and not 17 – nearly 18** … It's just the whole process of it is shocking.

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[25] See www.tusla.ie/services/alternative-care/after-care/tell-me-more-about-aftercare-workers.
[26] Aftercare from age 16 onwards is provided for young people who have spent 12 months in the care of Tusla or the HSE, between ages 13–18.

*It's like you're constantly fighting for something that you're entitled to automatically … I had to go and actually get them on my side and **purely to fight to get an aftercare worker** … I should have had him when I was 16. (May, FG3, in third-level education (college))*

Several other people in the study were also very critical about the aftercare they received. In some cases, they felt that they did not get sufficient support from their aftercare worker. For example, Sofia felt that her aftercare worker neither had sufficient time for her, nor supported her aspirations.

*Well, I found it an absolute nightmare to be honest; it didn't work well with me, and **I didn't have a connection or bond with my aftercare worker**. I think it would have been very important to actually get on with your aftercare worker. **She didn't really have time for me** to be honest. And **she shot down the [type of course] studies that I wanted to do**. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

Limited contact with her aftercare worker was also mentioned by Willow, who met with her aftercare worker twice a year. Willow had dropped out of third-level education due to her personal circumstances and found that her aftercare worker was not very sympathetic about the challenges she was facing at the time.

*I found aftercare a nightmare and I didn't get on with my aftercare worker. **We barely talked** … I've dropped out of college due to personal reasons. And there's just no support. I rang my aftercare worker to explain the situation and she was kind of like, 'Oh, **you're on your own now** … you're 22 years of age now. You should know how to do this by yourself' kind of thing. (Willow, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

While Theodore acknowledged that aftercare workers could be a real help in practical matters, such as budgeting, limited access to this service made Theodore try and figure things out by himself.

*I'd say, personally for me, I was 17 and first of all, I felt while aftercare was helpful in money management, budgeting, like I still found filling out important documents fairly difficult. **I had an aftercare worker for a very, very brief period.** And then I kind of did everything myself. (Theodore, FG1, in third-level education (university))*

Limited access to an aftercare worker could be partially explained by a number of care leavers they are working with.

*The aftercare worker at the time, she was new. **I'm assuming she had a lot on her plate** because I don't believe that she had just one of us. She probably had a couple of us that she had to work with. But why allocate somebody like that when you know it's needed? It's like the aftercare is something that is necessary, especially for somebody coming out of care, you know **it's a complete shock because you're left on your own. Like completely left on your own**. You don't know*

> *what to do. Like when you're 18, you're gone. (Lily, FG3, in third-level*
> *education (college))*

While Sofia also noted that there was no support from aftercare, she could contact a career counsellor in her college for advice. Sofia also felt that an aftercare worker can have a considerable power to make decisions about her life.

> ***[I had] no support from aftercare*** *I could go to, like it was a no-go*
> *zone. I was lucky enough in college – I had this career guidance*
> *teacher, counsellor who I would see on a weekly basis every two*
> *weeks. And she* ***helped me through a few things with regards to***
> ***education and all that****. To be honest, I was afraid of my aftercare*
> *worker, I actually was, because of all the power that she did have. Like,*
> *they can give me something as quick, but they can take it away just*
> *like that, you know? (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education*
> *(college))*

Eliana (FG5, interrupted third-level education (college)) and Theodore (FG1, in third-level education (university)) also noted that they did not have sufficient information about grants and other entitlements.

The interviews demonstrated that information about aftercare and various entitlements and supports is very fragmented, making it difficult for young people to navigate the post-care landscape. Mila, who had struggled with finding necessary information, became part of an initiative in her college that was responsible for informing young people about the supports available.

> *I'm a student ambassador for the Access team in my college … We*
> *inform care-experienced students about their entitlements when*
> *they're coming into college. So, things like SUSI, because those are not*
> *clear, there are terrible websites for a start, but also, they're just not*
> *really clear. So,* ***if you don't have someone telling you that you should***
> ***apply for these, you won't know that they exist****. So, I suppose that*
> *was kind of a thing that I struggled with at first. (Mila, FG2, in third-*
> *level education (college))*

Many interviewees felt that there are currently not sufficient resources to help young people leaving care, including social workers and aftercare workers. Theodore argued that considering the high turnover among the aftercare workers, it would be useful to have some standard documentation about procedures and supports that would serve as a signpost for a new person taking up the role.

> *There are simply not enough social workers, and definitely* ***not enough***
> ***aftercare workers to meet the amount of people leaving care*** *… And*
> *also, you're having such, you know,* ***turnover rates within the field****,*
> *you know … I think that would be really, really helpful even if the*
> *aftercare worker can't be fully engaged at all times, or if there is a*
> *change you have a document there, you have a signpost basically.*
> *I think that would be really, really helpful. (Theodore, FG1, in third-*

level education (university))

The topic of aftercare was also extensively discussed by the stakeholder consultation group. The participants noted that all eligible care leavers[27] should have an aftercare worker assigned to them. It was also noted that the level of engagement between the young person and the aftercare worker may vary depending on the young person's previous experience or other factors. The stakeholders argued that aftercare workers tend to offer support across a number of areas (see above), but that as a service, it is stretched.

> *[Eligible young people] all have an aftercare worker, but **the level of engagement changes from student to student … Sometimes they don't engage**, and sometimes the reason for that can be that their previous experience hasn't been good … yes, [aftercare workers are] really busy, they are trying to manage education, but also the housing health, all the daily kind of practical issues as well. But **I would say they're stretched**. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

A call for more support for children and young people leaving care was already issued by the delegates at the Irish Aftercare Network's Annual Conference several years ago. The delegates found current service provision for care leavers insufficiently resourced to provide the level of practical support or therapeutic support for this group of young people, many of whom have suffered significant trauma during childhood.[28]

The stakeholders in this study noted that the provision of aftercare services can also be region dependent, with some larger regions being more stretched than others, with the number of referrals that the service receives taking longer to process.

> *And so, [aftercare workers are] **very, very, very stretched**. And referrals coming into them are taking a little bit longer for that reason. So, in some areas, I think they are probably sufficiently resourced. But in other areas, I know they're under-resourced. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

Aftercare provision was associated with various challenges including supporting a young person who moves to another city to pursue their third-level education as well as being driven by personal circumstances of some young people.

> *If a young person is from [town name] and they're attending college in [town name], **the geographical spread is very hard for an aftercare worker**. They might have phone contact, but the physical contact is often missing because for the aftercare worker to go from [A] to [B], it becomes a full day's work. And then the nature of the work, sometimes they're crisis led. I'm not saying all young people in aftercare are in*

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[27] For more information, see www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/4255-TUSLA_Allocation_Aftercare_Worker_v3.pdf.

[28] See www.focusireland.ie/press-release/irish-aftercare-network-calls-for-more-support-for-young-people-leaving-care.

*crisis, but it can be crisis led. So, then **the person that's in the biggest crisis gets the resources** and the young people or students that are doing quite well might be kind of siloed or become the secondary priority, if that makes sense. So, if you feel the students are doing well, they are in college, then maybe the priorities don't always go to that young person either. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

7.3 FROM CARE TO COLLEGE

7.3.1 Considering post-school options

For young people who have been in care, leaving school means choosing between different options. When asked what they wanted to do after leaving school, some young people in the study said that they had their sights set on continuing their education. 'I always just thought that's what you do, that you finish school and you go to college.' (Luna, FG1, in third-level education (university)) For Isabella, going on to third level was portrayed by her social workers and foster parents as the only option available to her.

> *I just thought that was **something you had to do**, to be honest. You know, you just went. You finish sixth year at school and go through to college. I didn't think about not doing college … I just always thought that you had to go to college and that was it. Like, **I was never given any other options** but to go to college, and that was from social workers. And my foster mom in particular, she said no, you go to college. So yeah, I just thought that was something that everybody did, to be honest with you. (Isabella, FG1, in third-level education (college))*

In other words, for some young people, going to third-level education was something that was expected of them, something that everybody did after finishing secondary school.

However, some others would have liked to have had some time between leaving school and continuing their studies. Three interviewees had wanted to do a gap year before moving into third-level education, but were advised against it, mainly because of the rules around the aftercare allowance.[29] In fact, Willow noted that the only reason she considered third-level education was access to the aftercare support.

> *Like, nobody believed in the gap year. **I was warned about not doing the gap year**, you know? So yeah, [going to college was] just expected. (Isabella, FG1, in third-level education (college))*
>
> *I didn't really want to go [to third level]. I wanted to do a gap year, and I kind of **was told pretty sharply that that wasn't really gonna be***

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[29] Aftercare allowance of €300 per week is available for eligible care leavers attending accredited education or training course. This is available to care leavers up to the age of 23.

> *a great option for me* *because of the aftercare payment (Ava, FG1, in*
> *third-level education (college))*

> *I think* **the only reason I went to college was because of aftercare***.*
> *Because I needed that support. I always wanted to take the year out*
> *between doing my Leaving Cert and going to college, but that wasn't*
> *an option. (Willow, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

For Willow, taking a gap year would have given her more time to try and figure out what she was interested in doing after finishing school. She felt that not knowing what to do and feeling the pressure to go to college affected her mental health. The situation was not helped by the fact that the college course was chosen for her, in a field that she had no interest in. This may partly be a reason why Willow did not complete the course she was signed up to do.

> *I was kind of* **forced into college** *and* **the course was picked for** *me*
> *because I didn't know what I wanted to do. Yeah,* **I had no choice in it***.*
> *It was decided for me. Because before I moved into aftercare, my social*
> *worker at the time asked me what I wanted to do, and I didn't know*
> *what I wanted to do … And then I just got a call one day: you're starting*
> *[a course]. On this date. I had the biggest argument of my life that I*
> *did not want to do it, that it wasn't for me. And I'm still put into the*
> *course, and I still have to go, because my aftercare worker would ring*
> *the college and ask them if I was in. And if I wasn't in, then I'd get a*
> *call. So, I was kind of forced to resign myself to go in, which I really*
> *didn't want to. (Willow, FG5, interrupted third-level education*
> *(college))*

> *Researcher: And so, did you have any interest in this area?*

> *Willow: No.*

Financial support is available from Tusla based on assessment of need. Eligible young people who turn 18 years of age while in care are entitled to an aftercare allowance if they are in full-time education and training. Allowance payment from Tusla is €300 per week. Some young people[30] may also be eligible for an Aftercare Grant, which is a one-off payment, aimed at supporting them with initial moving home expenses. Setting up home allowance stands at €300. The aftercare allowance/grant emerged as a major theme in young people's discussion about their post-school pathway. Several young people felt that having an aftercare allowance tied to entry into third-level education was too restrictive and made them sometimes choose a course they may not have otherwise considered.

> *The first time I went to college for the [name of the course] course,*
> *where I left two months in. The only reason I did that was because I*

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[30] This refers to people who turned 18 years in the care of the Child and Family Agency having spent a period of 12 months in care of the agency between the ages of 17–18 years. Eligibility for the grant is also established by financial assessment of need.

*was told that **if I did not go to college after I finished secondary school, I would not be entitled to any aftercare**. So that really kind of just forced my mind into thinking that I have to go to college or have to do something, or else I'm gonna be, you know, thrown to the curb. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))*

Similar sentiment was expressed by Sofia, who felt that her future was very uncertain if she did not go to college.

*I think I was just going to give it a go. To be honest, I was worried. Like when I did turn 18, what was I going to do and where was I gonna go? And how am I gonna get by? And, I won't lie … **I did go to college so that I would be supported as well and to stay in aftercare**. You have to be in education. You don't get support for nothing up until the age of 21. So, there's kind of like an extra pressure then. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

Both young people ended up not completing the course. A phrase 'on my own terms' frequently featured in conversation with young people in this study when discussing entry into third-level education. Some people had wanted to continue their education after finishing their second-level education but would have preferred to make up their own mind rather than having their decision-making tied to the aftercare allowance and support. Hazel felt that despite wanting to continue her education, she did not enjoy the experience as she felt she was forced to make this decision.

*I was basically forced into education because of the aftercare allowance … So, I felt that it's more like you are forced into it rather than you want to go into it. **I did want to go back into education. But on my terms** kind of thing. But I was told, 'If you don't go back in now, you're not getting this [allowance] and you're not staying where you are' … So I was kind of forced into making an education choice that I didn't really want to (Hazel, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

While Levi enjoyed the course at third level, he still felt that he was forced into education, rather than doing it on his own terms. Levi also noted that some flexibility is necessary when granting support for care leavers, as some of them may be struggling with their personal issues and mental health as they leave school, and an entry into a new environment may not be in the best interest for such young people.

*It **should be on your own terms** and there needs to be a level of flexibility granted. So again, what I mean by this is, I felt that I was forced into taking the course and I was really lucky with the course that I got. It's a very good course at a very good university, and I'm not complaining. I'm really enjoying that course, but I didn't feel that I had an option. I'd also say that **I was nearly taking a risk by accepting that offer in terms of my mental health**. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

The interviews with young people demonstrated that linking aftercare support to third-level education was seen to have both positive and negative aspects. For young people who do not necessarily want to progress to third level immediately after secondary school, other options should be available. Going to college and ending up on a course that a young person does not enjoy, is not ideal for many reasons. However, the link between aftercare and college could also be positive, helping people to figure out what they want to do in future. For example, while Ezra felt very lost during the transition from secondary school to third level and feeling that he is almost doing it 'for the money', he acknowledged that linking an aftercare support to post-school education could incentivise young people to get a qualification and a career.

> Obviously, **you won't be able to ever get everyone under the same bracket**. Some people will want to work. Some people will want to do an apprenticeship. Some people want to take time off, and other people would want to go straight into college. Obviously, you know you can't just facilitate all of that. But I do think that there definitely could be a different way around … but I do think that **it definitely still could be tied to college and apprenticeships because they do give incentive to, you know, get a course, so that you can have a career**. So that you can almost plan out what you wanna do in the future. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))

The views of young people participating in the study were also echoed by the stakeholders. There was a consensus among the consultation group participants regarding inflexibility of the aftercare allowance. The allowance may be discontinued if the person needs time out of their third-level course for whatever reason. These young people may not return to college later on.

> Aftercare policy and the 'continuing education' clause means their allowance can be stopped if they take a year out, or in some cases have to stop due to mental health challenges. And **this can lead to young people not returning to higher education**. (Stakeholder consultation group)

Some participants argued that not all young people may be ready for continuing their education straight after finishing secondary school. Furthermore, more could be done to provide them with necessary skills that would make it easier for them to transition into young adulthood and enter third-level education.

> The aftercare allowance, I suppose **there is inflexibility there** – a lot of young people aren't necessarily ready for further education, higher education at that time. And if there **could be more room for personal development, mental health support, that could be financially supported** to get them more able and ready and competent to take on the rigours of academia and college life and young adulthood. (Stakeholder consultation group)

*I think the other thing I would say is that the aftercare allowance, that flexibility, I think, needs to happen, because **not everyone is mentally, academically ready after Leaving Cert**. Especially considering all the difficulties with the placements and the chaos. Sometimes **there needs to be room for personal development before going back into academia**. And I'm saying that as a guidance counsellor, you know. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

The current aftercare allowance may not be sufficient for young people considering the cost-of-living crisis in Ireland. The situation is particularly precarious for young care leavers who do not have families to fall back on when things may get difficult.

*I think another layer of the practical side of it is just the cost-of-living crisis and the fact that **an aftercare allowance hasn't changed in years**, and it doesn't replicate actually the increase. Never before have so many young people still been living at home, or older young people going back to live at home and having that base, and just those ripple effects of that impact of where that's going to lead. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

7.3.2 Challenges related to transition to college/higher education

Moving into third level can be challenging for all young people, irrespective of their background. Moving into third-level education may be challenging for care-experienced young people for a number of reasons, as discussed in this section. While many young people in care were used to encountering new environments and new people, moving to college can still be stressful for care-experienced young people.

*You think that you'd be used to moving to different places and new places … I suppose when I moved here for college **I found that very difficult** … it was like PTSD again … having to move and having to find a new place and being surrounded by new people. Like living in an apartment with two other people and stuff like that. Just like **the whole movement to college type thing, I found quite difficult**, you know? (Isabella, FG1, in third-level education (college))*

Furthermore, timing of the move to a third-level institution was mentioned by some young people as an additional difficulty as the move coincided with many overlapping challenges. Their views are best summed up by Sofia:

*I had started college in September, and I moved out in December, that Christmas. So, **I was in the middle of everything** like, you know, I'm trying to move things and attend and then organise myself and all that. **That was a huge, huge challenge**. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

7.3.2.1   Stigma attached to care experience

International research has shown that care-experienced young people can sometimes encounter stereotypical attitudes that associate being in care with poor educational outcomes, becoming young parents or turning to crime and may be in care for the reasons of their own doing (Dansey et al., 2019). Chapter 4 revealed that care-experienced young people in Ireland also feel stigma attached to being in care and sometimes encounter negative stereotypical views associated with being in care. When discussing their experiences and challenges in third-level education, some interviewees again highlighted stigma attached to care experience. Mila and Levi noted that care-experienced young people may be perceived by some as badly behaved and likely to end up in jail.

> *I think there's a big stigma … like if you're in foster care … that people in foster care are kind of different. And they're, like, **badly behaved**. And like **most people are gonna end up in jail**. Even if that's the case for some people, it's not the case for all people that are in care. So, it just kind of like impacted me in that kind of way. (Mila, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

> *Ireland does have this kind of stigma of those who are care experienced, maybe **having antisocial problems**. They do drugs, they do alcohol, et cetera, et cetera. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

Even if a young person had not encountered people with negative views of care-experienced young people, being in care is not necessarily the identity they want to be associated with. These young people felt that they wanted to develop their own identity, one that is not associated with being in care.

> *I find it hard to tell people even in college that I was in care. **I don't want people to see me as a 'hero'** … Because I came into college when I was 17, so some people would have been like, 'Wait, so you were kept in foster care, you did your Leaving Certificate, and you enter all these foster homes and then you had this struggle and then this happened to you and you're still in college?' … **It's not how I want to be seen**. (Mila, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

For these reasons, about half of young people in this study did not want to reveal their care background when going to third-level education. However, not knowing about the challenges some young people experience, it can be difficult to assess the numbers or make targeted support available for these young people.

> *We've had an issue here as to **how to get data of the numbers of CES** [care-experienced students] in our colleges and we're not getting it. **They're not coming forward**. And I get it because it was talked about – sensitivity and identity. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

7.3.2.2   Social and academic sphere

Leaving secondary school and moving into third-level education is likely to cause some adjustment issues for all young people, including those in care. Adjustment challenges were also highlighted by young people in this study, particularly when the move involved moving from a quiet, rural area into a large town. 'I think the socialisation aspect was a bit different for me and trying to make friends. So, I think I was a bit unprepared in that aspect.' (Nora, FG2, in third-level education (university))

Young people who had mental health issues seemed to face additional difficulties in settling into college life and making new friends. Hazel ended up gravitating towards young people who had similar experiences and felt it easier to connect with them.

> So, it is quite **difficult making new relationships with people because I just think, oh, they're just gonna leave now**. And what's the point in making friendships? But the majority of my friends have been in foster care, so they are my friends, my care friends, to be honest. It's people who share that experience. You're kind of just **able to connect with them on a different level that you're not able to do with other friends**. (Hazel, FG2, in third-level education (college))

Many young people who moved from secondary school to third level found it difficult to adjust to the new teaching and learning approaches in the latter. Instead of structured classes at school, in post-school education, students need to manage their own time. There is also more emphasis on self-directed learning. Some students that were interviewed for this study felt that they were not prepared for this shift, found study hard and struggled with attendance. The situation was even more difficult for students who had learning difficulties.

> **Academically speaking, it was more challenging**. I didn't expect it … I think that just could be the education system, though, like **I didn't feel prepared going into college**. It was a big shock. (Nora, FG2, in third-level education (university))

> I think **attending, then coming home and doing it [study] by myself**, there wasn't really a lot of support in the college I was in. **I struggle academically**, so if there was stuff that they couldn't understand, then there wasn't a lot of support to explain it to me. (Willow, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))

Sofia felt that her aftercare worker put more pressure on their attendance and study than their tutors. She found it particularly difficult due to her personal issues at the time, which were not taken into consideration. The accumulation of stress made this person drop out of college.

> I suppose just **the constant pressure with the attendance**. I won't lie, it was a nightmare for me. I am trying to attend and it's just the amount of pressure … not even tutors would put on to you. But like,

*again **aftercare, the amount of pressure that they put on me was horrendous**. And my own personal circumstances as well, [things] that were going on in my family weren't taken into consideration as to how that would have affected my performance in studying in college. So, that would have been probably another reason why if I were to drop out … I more or less did towards the end of it. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

While already struggling academically, health issues had an impact on attendance for Willow, who subsequently dropped out of third-level education. This added additional stress to this young adult, as aftercare support was withdrawn once she was no longer in full-time education. They felt responsible for not staying on the course and reported feeling they had nowhere to turn to for help.

***I did drop out this year due to health reasons and there was no support from aftercare**. It was kind of like: This is all your fault. Like everything in aftercare, my money, where I'm living, all of that is just gone. It's like gone within seconds of when you drop out of college. And no, **I got the letter from my doctor** just to say that I wasn't in the right headspace and that I wasn't able for college this year. And then I got a letter from my doctor to say that I physically wasn't able to get into college every day. And **that was just pushed aside**, like it didn't matter. I asked could I change to online learning and that wasn't an option either. (Willow, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

Inflexibility of the system was also highlighted by the stakeholder consultation group. It was acknowledged that the current aftercare system that is based on 'continuing education' does not allow for the mental health issues or personal circumstances that many care-experienced students experience. Some may need to take a short break before returning to their studies, but the current system makes it very difficult for students to re-engage once they have dropped out of third-level education.

*Mental health and gaps in education where young people may take breaks and then return to education, especially in the aftercare system, which refers to continuing education, it **makes it difficult then if young people want to re-enter third-level education** … it's not impossible but it can be a challenge. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

While many of the challenges mentioned above could also be encountered by young people with no care experience, some can be specific to those in care. For example, some young people felt that weekends and holidays were a difficult time, especially when their peers were leaving the campus to be with their families. Many felt that going to college enabled them to turn a new leaf in their lives and create a new support network around them.

***When everybody's going home during the weekend, I always kind of feel jealous** because it's like, oh, they have something good to go to … So, there were a lot of traumatic events I would have experienced*

*[at home] along the way when I was younger; it would have been very hard to go back home because it's like, **I'm going back to my trauma rather than I'm going back home**. Like when you're in foster … when you come to college, **you're kind of trying to form your own family, like with the friends you have**. (Mila, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

7.3.2.3   Mental health issues and support with emotional wellbeing

Some young people who had previously experienced mental health issues found it challenging to start college or sit their exams. For May, who has mental health issues, in-person learning at third level would have been a challenge. For her, starting her course online at first helped to build up her confidence. Mila was also experiencing mental health issues and was worried about how this might affect her exam performance.

*I struggled with college a good bit, but what helped me was the actual lockdown where it was online the first year and **I knew I was hidden** behind the camera. I was like, oh, this is fine. Like I'll get through this year. And then as I got more comfortable over the year, then I was like, OK, well if I can do it online, I can go in and do it in college, because **I've really bad anxiety** as well. So, I find it hard to go out. (May, FG3, in third-level education (college))*

*And like for me, **there is just so much pressure** … I have exams next week but I still feel like, am I really ready? I'm kind of like **coming out of a bit of an episode or am kind of still in it**. I'm just not myself. I'm very tense and I just haven't been feeling well. I've just been like in bed. (Mila, FG2, in third-level education (college))*

When asked about support regarding mental health and emotional wellbeing, Sofia (FG5) noted that this did not 'come into it at all'. She organised her own therapy, funded by the aftercare system. She received little support from her aftercare worker in doing so.

*It didn't come into it at all. Now, **I took care of my own emotional wellbeing** with my own therapy and I made sure that aftercare funded it for me. You know, I kind of got on to them and said that you do have to actually fund me for that. So, they financially supported my emotional wellbeing through therapy, but the connection between me and the aftercare worker was like, no. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

For Willow, insensitivity from her aftercare worker regarding personal issues and related stress affected her emotional wellbeing.

*Well, **I feel like there's no emotional support.** Like when I was in my first year of college, a family member of mine got cancer, so that affected me going to college because it was really upsetting me, and*

*I was just told, 'Oh, it's not you that has cancer. So, **you have to keep going to college**.' (Willow, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

The stakeholder consultation group noted that many care-experienced students go through third-level education without any notable issues. However, the lack of mental health support and increased anxiety post-COVID-19 can be a problem for some care-experienced students, as well as housing instability. This may result in some students repeating a year, sometimes several times.

*So, I'm working at the [name of university] and I'm kind of full-time working with care-experienced students, which is great. **A lot of the students move from year to year with no problems**, but I think **39% do repeat a year, at least once**. But the students that are repeating a year for three or four times, that have linked in with me, **it's either lack of mental health support or extreme anxiety post-COVID-19.** Some of them lived alone during the lockdowns, and then **housing instability**. Those tend to be the three things that kind of [impact their progression]. Being left between the transition from having CAMHS and then being now with the adult mental health, and maybe not received a needed diagnosis. The students that are really struggling tend to be around those specific areas. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

7.3.2.4 Financial issues

Young people in this study felt that financial issues were a notable challenge when moving into aftercare. Some felt that the financial support available from Tusla was not sufficient for their needs. The situation can be more difficult for these young people who need to pay for their therapy.

*Like living in student accommodation. Much of my money is gone to live here, so I'm left with €140 a week; €100 of that has gone to counselling each week, which l**eaves me €40 to get things that I actually need**, like shopping. Stuff to get me through the week. (Willow, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

In order to support themselves, some young people felt they needed to take up employment when in college, reflecting the situation for many young people in the general student population. This echoes the comments made by the consultation group about the financial aid to care-experienced young people having not changed for a while.

*I ended up **having to get myself a full-time job**, so I was doing my bar work full time and trying to go to college. Late nights. **I couldn't find the balance to put 100% of the work into college**. So that was another challenge. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

While engaging in employment while in college is relatively common to all

students, the situation may be more challenging for care-experienced students as their attendance tends to be closely monitored by their aftercare worker.

Close monitoring of their financial expenditure by their aftercare worker was adding additional stress to the experience in post-school education for some young people.

> *Literally like giving the student financially what they need, what is considered enough nowadays. Like because you know how very expensive it is to live. But **not to be like controlling what they do with the money** that's being given to the student. Like because you know you're not gonna learn otherwise. You have to make mistakes in order to learn. You know you should not be crucified for a mistake. (Sofia, FG5, interrupted third-level education (college))*

The stakeholders noted that young people should be given more guidance in how to manage their finances while in college and later on, when they leave education.

> *From my experience, **I have seen numerous issues from a financial aspect** – a lack of money management, no education/support given to the young person [about that]. Then, financial support falling off a cliff once they turn 22 or leave education. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

7.3.2.5   Accommodation

Accommodation was another challenge that young people in this study had to face, reflecting the difficulties experienced by all students due to the housing shortage. The options available to students include on-campus[31] or off-campus (rented) accommodation. Some third-level colleges do not provide on-campus accommodation[32]. This was seen to put an onus on young people to find a place in the current high-priced rental market. Ava and Levi felt that it is harder for care-experienced young people to find suitable accommodation within the funding available.

> *When I came to college, finding accommodation [was a challenge] because in my college, there's **no on-campus accommodation**, it's all private accommodation. So that's a bit of a weird one. You kinda have to go and look, and keep looking, and sometimes it might not be the most suitable accommodation and stuff like that, and also, it's really hard to budget €300 a week, which I know sounds like a lot, but when **my accommodation is €650 a month, and that does not include electricity. So that's basically over half gone.** (Ava, FG1, in third-level education (college))*

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[31] On-campus accommodation is currently over-subscribed (Department of Education, 2024). Students who are not successful in securing on-campus accommodation need to turn to the private rental market.

[32] For the 2024/2025 academic year, Student Accommodation Assistance is being provided to assist students from Traveller and Roma backgrounds and care-experienced young people while attending third-level education. The latter must have experience of the care system between the ages of 16–18 and not be in receipt of an aftercare allowance.

*I generally didn't know what to do, because **it was either I get accommodation or I'm not going to college** – like there's no way. I have no family within [name of a city] or commuting counties. It's either I get student accommodation, or I don't go to college, because the reality of me trying to find private accommodation when first of all I live in [name of a province], and I don't have a driving licence. It's just not possible, because **everyone's looking for accommodation**. So, you might only get a limited number of viewings, and it might be even harder for you to attend those viewings and then to show up on time and stuff like that … **students, at least from my university, which is a fairly big university, are not guaranteed student accommodation. I think that [care-experienced students] need to be included within the priority groups.** (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

Challenges related to accommodation of care-experienced students in college were also highlighted by the stakeholders. Once a young person turns 18, in most cases they need to move from a foster home/residential care into an alternative accommodation. Where the foster parents still provide accommodation, they face financial challenges associated with reduced allowance.

*Accommodation after turning 18 is a challenge as **the young person may not have the option to stay on in the foster home** and foster carers who do offer accommodation ongoing have reported it to be financially difficult due to a drop in the allowance. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

Securing priority accommodation for care-experienced young people is not common in Ireland. However, one institution has a small number of rooms for first year care-experienced students. The representative of this institution argued that unstable accommodation tends to be one of the biggest sources of stress for the students. The stakeholders suggested that the provision of accommodation for care-experienced young people could be modelled following an example from the UK, where such students can stay in the college-provided accommodation for the whole year and throughout their studies. It was felt that third-level institutions should reserve some accommodation for care-experienced students.

*This year is the first year that we have kind of set aside [accommodation], **we got eight rooms for first year care-experienced students**. So, if they didn't get an allocation in the general lottery, I have a waiting list of students who've contacted us. And that has been another effective way of getting aftercare workers linked in, and students linked in as well. But I think also that's **one of the biggest stressors for students is unstable accommodation**. Like, there's a young girl who's living in a house with eight other girls in her first year at university, who previous to this had had multiple placements. So, it is something that I'm trying to advocate to the university – to expand [accommodation provision] from first year, because the UK models,*

they will have accommodation that can go throughout the year, and you can be in that for all four years. Whereas our accommodation, because it's so limited, is very much reserved for first year students. So, there's more work to be done there, but I think it's made a difference. (Stakeholder consultation group)

A representative of another institution noted that while they do not currently have priority accommodation for care-experienced students, this is something that they would like to provide – indicating that there is an awareness of need and willingness to provide such support for care-experienced young people attending third-level education courses.

*We don't own our student accommodation, but **we'd love to be in a position of prioritising ten beds a year or 15 beds a year**. And maybe that's something that we can work in conjunction with Tusla on securing. I'm not sure of how to go about it, but I think if every university could do 20 beds. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

7.4 THE NEED FOR FLEXIBILITY IN SUPPORTING YOUNG CARE LEAVERS

The interviewees in this study felt that the support available to care leavers should be more flexible and take into account their various circumstances and challenges.

Levi felt that it is important for young care leavers to know what kind of educational pathway they want to pursue. Flexibility of support is needed as the pathway may not necessarily be an entry into third-level education. Some may be passionate about going into trade that is not accredited by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) but would allow the person to build a career and stable life for themselves. In addition to having access to different opportunities and courses, some flexibility for taking a break and taking stock may also be beneficial for some young people.

*Maybe when you're in **some of the trades** that may not be QQI accredited, and **that might be what that young person's really passionate about** and could make a really good job and career and life … So, I definitely think there needs to be support and help in that for a young person, the different opportunities and courses available to them. But **also allow a young person to take a breather**, I think is very important. (Levi, FG2, in third-level education (university))*

Flexible entry into third-level education was highlighted by another young person. Ezra felt that he was not given an opportunity to say that he was not ready to continue his education straight after finishing school as the aftercare support is tied to being in full-time accredited education or taking up an apprenticeship. He argued that the current aftercare system provides young people with a direction, but this is not always enough if the person is unsure what option they would like to pursue.

*I did visit a couple of different counsellors, and this was in between times while I was in school … It was as if **I couldn't even tell them that***

> *I'm not ready for this right now, because if I did, it would be: 'OK that's not the way our system works' or … 'You must advance into aftercare or, you know, get an apprenticeship or do a course or you have to be doing something.' It was very difficult to even to know what to do or where to go. It was almost like **giving me a direction, but not having a roll-out**, you know? There was nothing in front of me, and I didn't know where to go and … I felt pressured. I felt like I had to make a decision now or else I would lose the extra benefits that aftercare does allow. (Ezra, FG4, interrupted third-level education (college))*

The need for additional and targeted support for care-experienced students in third-level education was also acknowledged by the stakeholders. The appointment of a dedicated person with a responsibility of working with such young people was one approach discussed by the group, although across the third-level institutions, it is still 'unusual' to have such a person in place, as it is difficult to identify care-experienced students if they have not made themselves known. 'If we were to work solely with care-experienced students, we wouldn't know who they are. We actually don't know who the students are.' (Stakeholder consultation group) The institution where a dedicated person was in place, students were identified by a number of different means, including a laptop loan scheme on financial aid services. Most of the students that have linked in with the dedicated person came through referrals from aftercare services.

The stakeholders highlighted the need to have a dedicated person, such as a guidance counsellor, in place that works specially with care-experienced students and is funded by the state across all higher education institutions.

> *I think the other thing that is really important, in terms of the good supports, **having that one good adult**, and the extra support that could be available through a guidance counsellor in Tusla or other educational settings that could be that one good adult in the personal and academic space. There's a role there. I think it's really important to get more allocations for that. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

It was also noted that data on care-experienced students could be collected centrally, at the CAO level. However, it was acknowledged that students need an incentive to tick the care-experienced box on their application form.

> *But if you could make [identification as care-experienced on an application form], but the reason they tick the care-experienced box there is **because they get supports that are very clear and very evident**. I'm not going to tick a care-experienced box unless I know what I'm gonna get out of it. I think, there has to be a carrot. Like there has to be a reason that somebody would benefit from doing that in the first instance. And so therefore, it has to be a national piece – that you get supported accommodation, or you get whatever. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

Overall, it was noted by the stakeholders that to effectively support care-

experienced young people throughout their educational career and build up their ambition regarding post-secondary education, early intervention is a must, reflecting international research that suggest supporting care-experienced children's education and ambitions in primary school. The support systems must also acknowledge that direct entry into third-level education should not be the only option for care-experienced young people. The support available should be personalised, taking into account the wishes of a young person.

> *And early intervention … the importance of that at all the key transition stages. And particularly that at those early intervention points, that there is, I suppose, **more aspirational work done** on what the potential of children is to achieve and clearer pathways on how to achieve their goals, that **there could be more work done in those areas**. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

> *Guidance counts, and even earlier intervention … because **the earlier you can get in as a guidance counsellor**, and then **other support workers**, that I think **is really key to young people reaching their potential**. And it needs to be **person-centred** as well, not just you're going into higher education. You have to get so many points. There are so many options now in the education system, and you can get into higher education in a roundabout way if you want, but **it's just working with the person and what they want to do. And kind of building the support around that**. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

> *Being **able to avail of other options, other than college**, such as apprenticeships or going into a work environment. The aftercare payment is linked solely to education, which doesn't suit everyone, doesn't meet the needs of all young people. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

Previous research in Ireland has highlighted the importance of interagency work in supporting young people while noting a lack of co-operation by agencies (McElvaney et al., 2013). In the same vein, the stakeholders in this study highlighted the importance of interagency collaboration involving guidance counsellors, Access Officers, and care workers in supporting care-experienced young people, considering the variety of challenges these young people experience. While there are different agencies represented on steering committees working with Tusla[33] at the moment, it was felt that the makeup of these may vary and may not always include input from some essential stakeholders that work closely with care-experienced young people.

> *I think **interagency collaboration is key**. We all agreed on that point, whether we're in further education and training or higher education, and we have specific roles, as guidance counsellors, Access Officers*

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[33] For example, an aftercare steering committee includes representatives from a number of government agencies. For further information, see www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/4250-TUSLA_Steering_Committee_v3.pdf.

*and dedicated care experience support roles. I think the interagency collaboration, **because the challenges are so varied**, just **having that as a framework rather than something that would happen organically** where the professional might know this person, or that … just to have that tightened, **uniform framework of support**, I think would be really important. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

*We're coming back to that, the level of interagency work, which is out there. I know from my own experience that there are interagency steering committee meetings where you'll have a number of agencies working with Tusla. But again, **the makeup of those in committees can vary as well** … Guidance counselling, I think is key. (Stakeholder consultation group)*

In addition to early interventions and interagency collaboration in supporting care-experienced young people, consistency of support was found to be essential. 'Support structures (educational and other) set up throughout the educational system for all transitions and ongoing throughout school and college.' (Stakeholder consultation group) Overall, the stakeholders called for a change in supporting care-experienced young people. 'We need systemic change, things are very siloed, we need more interagency, we need more referral systems and dedicated supports.' (Stakeholder consultation group) In order to bring about change, various organisations need to operate in tandem in providing consistent support to care-experienced young people.

7.5   CONCLUSION

This chapter has focused on the transition from the care system and second-level education to aftercare and third-level education. In recognition of the importance of post-care transition, supports such as an aftercare worker, have been put in place to assist young care leavers. However, the relationship between the young person and their aftercare worker is not always positive as demonstrated by the narratives of young people in this study.

Making the transition from second-level school to third-level education can be challenging for young people due to the differences in teaching and learning approaches between the two sectors. Many young people may also be uncertain about whether this pathway is right for them, or even if it is, what course they should apply for. Furthermore, for some, the decision to enter third-level education tends to be linked to access to aftercare allowance rather than a desire to continue their education. While providing a useful roadmap for many young people who are not certain what to do after finishing school, a requirement for being in full-time education or training in order to avail of aftercare support may put some people under pressure, especially the ones who may not have chosen this pathway, or who may have wished to pursue this pathway later on.

Once in third-level education, young care leavers tend to encounter a number

of overlapping challenges, including inadequate finances, issues around accommodation, adjusting to more self-directed learning, to name a few. Young people with learning difficulties or who experience mental health issues tend to find the transition to third-level education even more challenging. Some young people were critical about the level of assistance they received, particularly regarding their mental health and emotional wellbeing.

In order to assist young people, changes are needed, whereby children and young people in care receive consistent and sufficient support throughout their educational career. Interventions need to be introduced early, and the support needs to be embedded in an interagency collaboration and be sufficiently flexible, reflecting the varied, and sometimes complex needs of young care leavers. Designated personnel, or 'one good adult' continues to be important in the lives of young care leavers as they enter into independent living and third-level education.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusions and policy implications

8.1   INTRODUCTION

In cases where the birth parents of children and young people are not able to offer adequate care for them, they are provided with alternative care arrangements by the state. Although being in the care of the state is something that is common among these children and young people, they are not a homogenous group as their personal experiences and circumstances vary. International research across different jurisdictions (Evans et al., 2017; Gypen et al., 2017; Haddow et al., 2021; Bakketeig et al., 2020) and Irish research (Darmody et al., 2013; Brady and Gilligan, 2019; Brady et al., 2019a, 2019b) has consistently shown that, on average, these young people encounter a range of challenges throughout their lives and educational careers. Systematic reviews have shown that these children tend to have poorer educational outcomes and attainment level, often associated with high mobility in terms of multiple care placements and school changes (Gypen et al., 2017; O'Higgins et al., 2015; Townsend et al., 2020). A scoping review has indicated that the situation tends to be more difficult for young people who have learning difficulties or experience issues with mental health (Hammond et al., 2020). Furthermore, some care-experienced children and young people may encounter lower expectations from their teachers, foster parents and social workers and, at times, may not receive sufficient and consistent support from them (Mannay et al., 2017a; Harvey et al., 2015). In turn, poorer educational outcomes may lead to poorer life chances of these young people, as tends to be the case with all young people (Duncan and Murnane, 2011; Smyth and Hannan, 2000), but may be more acute for care-experienced young people.

According to the data from Tusla, there were 5,801 children (0–17 years) in care at the end of February 2025 (Tusla, 2025), mostly in general or relative foster care (CSO, 2024a). The CSO data show that while many of them had just one care placement, a small minority experienced several disruptions to their care placements. Compared to their non-care peers, care-experienced children were also more likely to be enrolled at more than one primary or secondary school (ibid.). In line with international studies (see Klein et al., 2022), care-experienced children and young people in Ireland also tend to have poorer levels of school attendance than their non-care peers (CSO, 2024a). Being in foster care, compared to other types of care, seems to act as a protective factor against poor school attendance (ibid.). Reflecting various challenges these young people encounter, some tend to leave school without a Leaving Certificate (28% vs 8% of all students) (CSO, 2024a) – the results of which determine their entry into third-level education. Compared to all children in Ireland, those with care experience are less likely to attend higher education courses.

In Ireland, total enrolments in higher education have increased over time, with a proportion of individuals with tertiary degrees now higher than the EU average (CSO, 2024b). To widen participation in higher education, efforts have been made to facilitate access to higher education among underrepresented groups such as those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic minorities (e.g. Traveller and Roma communities), and students with disabilities. It has been increasingly acknowledged by studies from different jurisdictions and Ireland that although care-experienced young people is a highly heterogenous group, these young people face a number of challenges when accessing third-level education, including lower levels of educational attainment, low expectations from teachers and carers, low aspirations and concerns about the affordability of continuing their education (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Bayfield, 2023; Colvin and Knight, 2021; Harvey et al., 2015; McNamara et al., 2017). Reflecting this, the *National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022–2028* (Government of Ireland, 2022) has included care-experienced young people in the categories that need additional support in continuing their education in this sector for the first time.

Previous international research has shown that a lower level of participation in tertiary education among this group can be associated with a number of factors, including prior academic outcomes and low aspirations, but also insufficient information and support in planning their post-secondary school trajectories (McNamara et al., 2017; Sellar and Gale, 2011; Williams et al., 2020). Finishing school and mapping out their next steps coincides with leaving the care system and entry into independent living and post-school education, in other words, a 'double transition'. This small-scale exploratory study has explored the factors that had influenced educational experiences of care-experienced young people while still in school and while preparing to leave school, to understand the challenges associated with the 'double transition'. In particular, the report aims to shed light on how the care experience impacts on academic and social spheres at school, what factors inform the decision-making process regarding post-school education, and the main challenges care-experienced young people face after leaving school and entering third-level education.

In addressing these aims, this report draws on the views and experiences of 16 care-experienced young people who had left school at the time of data collection as well as the views of key stakeholders representing a range of organisations. All young people in this study had entered third-level education. At the time of the interview, most of them were attending a course; however, four individuals had dropped out. To understand the progression of young people in this study to post-secondary education, the study delves deeper into their experiences when still in school and subsequent transition, seeking to highlight the factors that impacted on their aspirations and post-school trajectories. As the study is based on the views of a small group of care-experienced young people, the findings cannot be generalised to the population of care-experienced young people.

However, the findings provide useful insights for policy development and further research in this area.

8.2   MAIN FINDINGS

8.2.1   Care-experienced children and young people at school

The results of the study show that how students fare in academically and socially is strongly influenced by their care experiences, particularly for these young people who had had multiple care placements and school changes, in line with international (Haddow et al., 2021; O'Higgins et al., 2015; Bakketeig et al., 2020) and Irish research (Darmody et al., 2013; Brady and Gilligan, 2019; Daly, 2012; McElvaney et al., 2013). Discussions with young people in this study indicated that having less challenges in school was associated with being placed into care at an early age, and having more stable and nurturing care placements, while high mobility in terms of care placements and school changes seemed to make their school engagement more challenging due to the unsettling nature of constant change. Care placement changes may result in students missing school and finding it hard to catch up afterwards. Multiple moves may have an adverse impact on a young person's ability to adjust to new routines and rules, their educational outcomes, ability to form interpersonal relationships and their wellbeing. Proactive and supportive foster parents play a key role in supporting the education of young people in their care and helping them in developing aspirations for their future. In addition to the foster parents, social workers can play an important role in supporting care-experienced young people, including help with adjusting to a new school. However, communication between social workers, foster parents and school personnel may sometimes be insufficient, as demonstrated by this study. Additional challenges were experienced by those young people who had mental health issues or learning difficulties, in line with international (Hammond et al., 2020) and Irish research (McElvaney et al., 2023). The findings of this study also show that some young people felt that some school staff and teachers had low expectations of them, which in some cases were linked to stereotypical views of care-experienced children as low achievers or ones who behave badly. However, most young people noted that they generally got on well with their teachers, and some had at least one teacher or another member of staff that they could approach for support. Teachers can have a transformative role in the lives of students. Their support is particularly important for care-experienced young people who often have disrupted lives in terms of care placements and change of schools. Students may find it easier to ask for support if a teacher shows genuine interest in their lives. The findings also showed that support from foster families and social workers was important for young people in this study in negotiating their way through school and supporting their education. Quality of support from foster families is important as young people with supportive foster families who recognise the importance of education can get a lot of advice and support from them. While many young people in this study had performed well at school, some

struggled with attendance and juggling schoolwork alongside their everyday personal difficulties. Students who had learning difficulties or were experiencing issues around their mental health and wellbeing tended to find study harder, especially during the preparation for state exams with associated added stress.

The interviews conducted for this study showed that young people's attitude to school is often influenced by changes in the care placements and school changes, learning difficulties, insufficient support with schoolwork, not feeling as smart as other students, and mental health issues. Some of these issues were also associated with poor school attendance. It is important to note that poor school attendance and lower grades do not necessarily reflect lack of interest of a young person in education but is often influenced by circumstances beyond their control. Better understanding is needed about challenges faced by these students, many of whom may have had experienced trauma, which in turn has impacted their school attendance and engagement. Recently launched Take Care resources (EPIC, 2025), developed for schools, provide invaluable information for teachers and principals on how to best support care-experienced children and young people.

International (Schwartz-Mette et al., 2020) and Irish research (Darmody et al., 2013) has highlighted the importance of friendships in academic settings that can act as a support network for young people. Positive interaction between students has been found to enhance their social skills, support their learning and may contribute to their academic outcomes (Haddow et al., 2021). The results of this study showed that making friends was harder for young people who had experienced several school changes. Interrupted friendships made it more difficult for these young people to form new interpersonal connections, as their experiences had shown that once they needed to move schools, these friendships would, once again, cease. In some cases, care-experienced young people found it difficult to form close friendships as it was difficult to explain their living arrangements, especially when in residential care. A few young people had also experienced bullying at school. However, this was not always linked to their care background.

Interpersonal relationships with their social workers was another challenge that some young people had experienced. While in many cases the social worker was the 'one constant' in young people's lives, in other cases such support was found to be wanting, especially when there had been a change in a social worker or when the interaction between the young person and the social worker was limited. These young people often felt unsupported. Young care leavers also had varying support from their aftercare workers. While in some cases an aftercare worker was considered to be an asset in exiting the care system and supporting their transition to third-level education, in other cases this support was negligible, leaving some young people to be 'their own support'.

8.2.2 Leaving school and leaving care

In line with previous research from Ireland and elsewhere, the results of this study

show that care-experienced young people who 'age out' of the care system need support in a range of areas (Mullan, 2018; Atkinson and Hyde, 2019; Ellis and Johnston, 2022). Information gathered from young people in this study showed that preparation for the 'double transition' of leaving care and leaving school was a challenging time for many. While some young people experienced difficulties in the academic sphere throughout the second-level schooling, preparation for the Leaving Certificate exams had left some of them additionally anxious and stressed, particularly those young people who were experiencing personal challenges such as mental health issues, learning difficulties and/or care changes. While all students may find this period in their schooling stressful, the situation is likely to be more challenging for care-experienced young people who often lack the supportive family structure, as has highlighted by international literature (Storø, 2018; Paulsen and Berg, 2016).

International research has shown that care-experienced young people may not have sufficient information about the possibilities and opportunities beyond secondary school (Muir and Hand, 2018). Many young people in this study had been undecided about what to do after finishing school. While all young people had access to a guidance counsellor, for many, guidance about their post-school options was seen as insufficient. For some, their personal ambitions for a course to pursue in third-level education were not supported by their guidance counsellors or their social workers. At this juncture in their lives, young people need to be assured that they can do well and achieve their goals. Negative feedback from teachers and career guidance may demotivate some young people. For others, their foster families and social workers were instrumental in supporting their ambition for accessing third-level education. Entry into third-level education was considered by some young people to be an important milestone, as it provided hope for a new start, an exit from the care system and to be 'like everybody else'.

Some young people perceived entry into third-level education after finishing school as something that 'you do'. Typically, these young people had a more stable care placement, had experienced fewer school changes and had high expectations from their foster parents and social workers. These students also tended to have more positive experiences at school. However, others were critical about this being the only pathway tied to their aftercare support. At present, aftercare support is available to young people in accredited full-time education or training. Several young people did not wish to pursue third-level education and felt pressurised to do so, as they felt there was no other support available for them once they leave the care system. Some had wanted to delay their entry into third-level education, but this option was not available to them. For some, having to pick a course in third-level education without really knowing what they wanted to do, resulted in young people picking a course that they did not really enjoy. Young people who had not wished to enter third-level education straight after secondary school, those who were undecided what to study, and those experiencing mental health challenges and learning difficulties, were also more likely to have an interrupted third-level experience. Greater flexibility in supports was also endorsed by the

stakeholders in this study, echoing the views of young people, some of whom were uncertain about the next step, or were not ready to transition into third-level education.

8.2.3 Challenges faced by care-experienced young people in college/ higher education

Previous research from Ireland has demonstrated that moving from a secondary school to third-level education involves multiple challenges for young people (McCoy et al., 2014; Denny, 2020). Typically, this transition involves moving away from home and starting an independent life in college, needing to adapt to a new environment, forming interpersonal relationships with academic staff and peers and experiencing different approaches to teaching and learning. For care-experienced students, the challenges may be more acute, as they need to make this transition largely without family support or continued support of their foster parents, as highlighted by international research (Atkinson and Hyde, 2019; Ellis and Johnston, 2022). Based on the assessment of need, young care leavers in Ireland can be allocated an aftercare worker, who is responsible for assisting young people across a range of areas including support with all relevant documentation, information about their entitlements and making relevant referrals, where and if required (Tusla, 2019). The results of this study have shown that while some people found their aftercare worker very helpful during and after the transition from the state care system, others had minimal contact with their aftercare worker or experienced tension when interacting with them. Since young care leavers do not have similar support structures in place that are available to students who live with their birth families, having one consistent adult that they could turn to was considered essential, in line with international research (Storø, 2018). The intersection of school experience with care experience can be more limiting for care-experienced children and young people unless required support is put in place.

Several young people in this study felt largely unsupported in making the transition into third-level education and had experienced various challenges ranging from the practicalities of moving to a new location to figuring out their accommodation and finances, as well as managing their workload at college. Furthermore, it was felt that the finances were not sufficient considering the cost of living in Ireland, with some students filling the gap by engaging in term-time employment. While the cost of living is likely to have an impact on all students, it may be felt more acutely by care-experienced young people who often do not have access to family support. Others felt that monitoring their expenditure and college attendance by their aftercare worker was another source of stress and left them without independence or agency. While some had access to student accommodation, in some institutions there was no on-campus accommodation, only private lodgings that proved to be hard to find and expensive, especially in larger cities. As many young people that participated in this study were no longer in touch with their foster families, holidays and weekends were often difficult, especially when other students

returned to their homes.

A few young people in this study had considered dropping out of their course or had, in fact, done so. The reasons ranged from mental health issues and inflexibility of the study at third level, to struggling with their workload and having learning difficulties. Many felt that there was very little support available or were unsure who to turn to or how to access help.

8.3   Directions for policy development and further research

Much of international and Irish research has highlighted the importance of students' experiences in school in developing their aspirations (Billet et al., 2024; Belando-Montoro et al., 2024; McCoy et al., 2014). Schools, teachers and social workers need to prioritise the needs of care-experienced young people to support their school engagement and ensure they have the best possible opportunity to continue their education after finishing school, as a higher level of educational attainment is associated with better life chances later on. While care-experienced children and young people have their unique life histories, as a group they often experience similar challenges. At school level, teachers and other staff members should be sufficiently informed about the challenges associated with being in care, to adequately support care-experienced children and young people. By adopting a whole-school approach, schools can create an environment where all students, including those with care-experience can thrive (EPIC, 2025). Furthermore, teachers need to be 'care aware' (EPIC, 2025), in other words, having sufficient understanding of challenges that many care-experienced children and young people experience. Initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and continuous professional development (CPD) should provide teachers with necessary knowledge and skills regarding how best to support care-experienced children and young people, many of whom have experienced trauma in their lives. The *Take Care* resource and accompanying guide developed for schools (see EPIC, 2025) are valuable resources for schools in informing teachers and principals about the challenges faced by care-experienced children and countering negative stereotypes. Furthermore, future research could explore how different stakeholders (schools, social workers and other agencies) interact in providing a wrap-around support to young people as they move through the care and education system. Care leavers is not a homogenous group, and support structures need to be sufficiently flexible in meeting the varied needs of these young people. To do that, it is important to fully understand the experiences of care-experienced young people as they move through the care and education system and beyond. It is hoped that the Care Experiences project led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) with Tusla will provide valuable information on the long-term outcomes for young care leavers.

Discussions with young people in this study indicated that more support may be needed for young people who are experiencing issues with wellbeing and mental health. Policy interest in promoting wellbeing of all young people is demonstrated by the development of the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice*

2018–2023 (Government of Ireland, 2019). This important resource is aimed at 'schools, centres for education, children and young people, parents/carers, support services, government departments, non-government organisations and all those with an interest in wellbeing promotion in education' (p.5) and provides guidelines for effective practice. However, there may be need for free-of-charge, tailored ongoing supports that a young person can access when in third-level education/training. This could potentially be an 'incentive' for young people to disclose their care experience on a CAO form, an approach that could facilitate third-level institutions in identifying students for support. To provide support for care-experienced young people with mental health issues, more research is needed on how this may impact their access and success in third-level education.

The results of this study showed that some care-experienced young people may need additional support with their study and school engagement. Some may need additional tuition, especially when their schooling career has been fragmented. The School Completion Programme (SCP) is one way to provide additional support for these students. However, SCP is only available in DEIS schools and thus not accessible to students attending non-DEIS schools. Schools should also ensure that care-experienced students have access to high-quality and suitably informed pastoral and emotional support as well as learning support, to help them successfully complete their studies and develop aspirations for future. Close collaboration between schools, foster families, social and care workers is important to ensure that students' needs are met and that they have adequate support throughout their educational career. Interagency collaboration can make it easier for care-experienced young people to negotiate different transition points during their educational career.

Overall, an exit from the care system and second-level education followed by an entry into independent living and post-school education – a 'double transition' – can be challenging for many students. While still in school and in care, they can have 'many pairs of eyes' on them in terms of sources of support, the extent of support largely diminishing when they turn 18. Examples from other jurisdictions indicate some flexibility in age limits and eligibility conditions for care (Gilligan, 2018). If eligible, Irish young people in third-level education or training can avail of aftercare service by Tusla up until the age of 21. This can be extended to the age of 23 if a young person is still in full-time accredited education or training. However, a requirement for being in full-time education or training in order to avail of aftercare support may put some people under pressure, especially the ones who may not have chosen this pathway, or who may have wished to pursue this pathway later on. Advice and support from guidance counsellors is particularly important for care-experienced young people who lack such input from their families. Future research could also explore the decision-making of care-experienced young people after graduating regarding the entry into the labour market, particularly focusing on guidance and information received from college/higher education institutions in planning their post-graduation options.

Despite the aftercare support that is available for those who qualify for it, some young people may still struggle in post-school education. A national €300 weekly aftercare allowance was introduced in 2015. As highlighted by the students and stakeholders participating in this study, financial support available to these young people has not kept pace with the cost of living in Ireland. Not indexing this to inflation/wage increases means an effective cut in support. Limited funding is likely to necessitate taking up term-time employment. This, however, can distract young people from fully focusing on their studies. While this may apply to all young people trying to combine study with employment, the situation can be more acute for care-experienced young people who tend to lack family support.

Like many other young people, care-experienced students often struggle in finding suitable accommodation. At institutional level, care-experienced young people should be prioritised when allocating accommodation and this accommodation should be available throughout the year for the duration of the course the student is attending. Because this will be a 'home' for the young person during their studies, it should be suitable for accommodating all the belongings of the student (similar to what is provided by the University of York). These students may also need additional support during weekends and holidays, especially when other students return to their homes. One possible solution could be building linkages with local families, which may provide an opportunity for young people to have a place to stay during this time (similar to the Home Comforts programme by the Sussex Learning Network).

Third-level education providers need to put adequate and targeted supports in place to assist care-experienced young people. However, they may not be aware of students' care backgrounds, particularly if a young person is reluctant to reveal this information. Availability and validity of data on care-experienced young people is needed, in order to put in place necessary supports for these students. In the UK, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) has introduced a self-disclosure field for care leavers in their application form. Adopting a similar approach could be explored in Ireland regarding the CAO application form. Considering the unwillingness of some young people to disclose this information, self-identification needs to involve an incentive for a young person to do so.

The results of this study highlighted the need to ensure that young people experience a smooth and seamless transition from second-level education and the care system, and entry into independent living and post-school education. Failure to do so may result in an interrupted post-school education for some care-experienced students. Aftercare planning that starts early and involves input from young people, and consistency in support will go a long way towards ensuring that a young person has a seamless transition experience. Some young people in this study who had been allocated an aftercare worker had received very little support from them and felt that they were largely 'left to their own devices'. This could reflect the fact that the service is 'stretched', as noted by the stakeholders. At present, Tusla employs 71 aftercare workers, indicating that these individuals provide support to a number of young people in care.

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APPENDIX I

CARE TO COLLEGE: A STUDY ON CARE-EXPERIENCED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Interview schedule

Care placements and settling in at school

- Did you experience care placement changes when in school? How many care placements did you have? If yes, to what extent do you think it influenced your settling in at school?

- How often did you move schools? How did you find this? What could have been done to help?

- If you could cast your mind back to when you began secondary school (or when you were moved to your final secondary school) did you have any settling in difficulties? What helped you settle into school (support from carers, support from teachers, any other)?

Social experiences at school

- Can you tell me about your time in secondary school (experience of and attitudes towards education, schoolwork, the school system, teachers)?

- What did you like/dislike about school?

- Did you ever get into trouble at school?

- Did you ever have any problems with attendance?

- How did you get on with your teachers? Did they know you were in care? Did you want them to know?

- Were there any particular teachers or other professionals that you felt easy to talk to? How did it shape your experiences at school? If you had to change schools, what impact did this have?

- Do you feel that teachers provided you with additional academic help, emotional support, encouragement, and promoted your self-belief?

- How easy was it for you to make friends at school? How did this shape your experiences at school? If you had to change schools, what impact did this have?

- Did you feel your school understood what 'being in care' meant and supported you?

- Did you ever have any negative experiences with your peers or teachers at school as a result of being in care (peers and teacher perception, stigma)?

Academic experiences at school

- When in school, what programme did you follow (Leaving Certificate, LCA, LCVP)?

- What did you like most/least about the programme/subjects at school (subjects available, favourite subjects)?

- How did you do in your state exams (Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate)?

- Was doing well in your exams important to you? Why? Do you feel you received sufficient help at school?

- Did you have a special educational need in school, or did you ever receive any extra supports for your work in school? What did you find most helpful? Why?

- Do you think that your care experience impacted on how well you did at school (emotional issues, care placements, etc.)?

- Do you think that your school(s) and teachers were supportive in meeting your learning and emotional needs? What could be done differently?

- Did you ever receive additional help from your classmates with your school work?

Decision-making and progression

- While you were in school, did you get any advice on what you might do after school? Who gave you this advice? What kinds of things were you told (career guidance, options available)? Was this advice helpful?

- Do you think that your experiences in care influenced your goals and aspirations regarding what to do after you finished school? How?

- Thinking back, what do you think was most influential in deciding what to do after you finished school (influence of particular teachers, peers, how well you did at school)?

- What about care professionals and their support? Foster families?

Leaving school

- What did you do when you finished school? (Details on the nature of the job or jobs, courses, etc.)

- **[If entry into labour market]** What kinds of employment did you work in (employment, unemployed)?

- **[If PLC/training/apprenticeship]** What type of course did you do? Why did you choose to go on to further education (mobility, expectations, job/career choices, knowledge available)?

- How much support and information did you get in school regarding entry to higher education (HE)? Was this enough?

- **[If HE]** Why did you choose to go on to higher education?

- **[If not progressing to HE]**, what were the main reasons for this (encouragement from teachers, carers)?

- **[If dropping out of HE]**, what were the main reasons for this?

- Did the necessity to be in full-time education to receive an aftercare package have any influence on you going to university/college?

- **[If HE]**, who helped you to decide which course or higher education institution to choose? Who helped you to fill out the CAO form?

- What were the main challenges entering HE (geographic location, support network, curriculum, teaching and learning, accommodation, finances)?

General reflections

- What advice would you give to children in care at different stages of education?

- How could schools and teachers best support children with care experiences?

- Do you think there should be specific supports available in schools for children and young people in care?

- How do you think your experiences in care have shaped the way you see yourself and your personal growth?

APPENDIX II

CARE TO COLLEGE: A STUDY ON CARE-EXPERIENCED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Interview consent form

Purpose of the study

You are being asked to take part in a study on **Care-Experienced Students in Higher Education**, conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and funded by EPIC. The study involves online focus group interviews with young people with care experience who have progressed to higher education (HE), whose participation in HE has been interrupted, or who have not considered progression to HE.

What we are asking of you

We are asking you to take part in an interview on your experiences at school and how you decided what to do after finishing school. This interview will take up to 60 minutes and will be facilitated by EPIC. The interview will be conducted as a group online (by Microsoft Teams) or, if you prefer, by telephone. We would like to record the interview so that we can analyse the transcript. The research report on post-school decision-making of care-experienced young people will not name or identify any participants. The purpose is to learn from current experiences of care-experienced youth who have accessed HE or have not considered this option for various reasons, to improve access to HE for young people like you.

What you are agreeing to

- The interview will be recorded and transcribed. We will not ask you to share any personal information as part of the interview.
- The transcript of the interview will not be shared with anyone outside the research team.
- What you share with us is confidential unless you tell us something that makes us concerned about your wellbeing.
- The recordings will be destroyed once the transcriptions are finalised. The anonymised transcripts will be used for research purposes only and deleted after five years.
- Participation is entirely voluntary. You have the right to stop the interview and withdraw from the study.

Data protection

This study is carried out in accordance with Data Protection legislation. You can find detailed information about privacy and data protection for research conducted by the ESRI at www.esri.ie/esri-privacy-notice-for-research.

If you agree to participate in the study, please sign here:

Signature:_____ Date: _____

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